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Unveiling White Privilege in South Dakota

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ABSTRACT

Past research has shown white privilege, or the tendency of a certain group of people to receive increased opportunities and access to the benefits of society, to be commonly experienced by people identifying themselves as “white” (McIntosh, 1989). In this study, we explored the relationship between the race of participants and their reported experience of white privilege. The present study examined if this concept is applicable and holds true in current society among Midwestern undergraduate students and the general public in a Midwestern state. A total of 329 participants (46 undergraduate students and 283 from the general public) in a nonrandom sample answered a modified version of Peggy McIntosh’s White Privilege Survey (1988) to measure their experience of white privilege. The results revealed that whites experienced the highest degree of white privilege among the general public’s responses, the undergraduate students’ responses, and my own personal responses. However, the general public reported a lesser perception of white privilege ($M=1.8601$) overall compared to the undergraduate classes (fall: $M=1.6850$, spring: $M=1.7461$) and my own responses ($M=1.1975$). The results supported my hypothesis that white privilege is a factor in the general public in the state and in the fall undergraduate class of which I was a student. I also predicted that females would report less white privilege experience compared to males, which was confirmed. Identifying the occurrence of white privilege serves an important purpose of highlighting its presence and potential negative effects to those who are unaware of its influence.

INTRODUCTION

According to the US Census Bureau (2014), 85.9% of South Dakotans define themselves racially as “white,” or Caucasian. This statistic indicates that a large portion of the Midwest may experience what is known as “white privilege.” McIntosh (1989) captures the essence
of this concept by comparing it to an “invisible weightless knapsack [full] of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p.10). In other words, white privilege is the current system in society that allows whites to have more access to benefits, advantages, and opportunities solely because of the color of their skin. These advantages may include anything from readily being approved for a loan, being judged less likely to shoplift, or being less likely to suffer from hate crimes. For instance, Rankin and Reason (2005) discovered that college students of racial and gender minority groups experienced a higher rate of harassment on college campuses than their white and male counterparts. This finding displays an active manifestation of discrimination that stems from unfavorable judgments and stereotypes. Kottak and Kozaitis (2012) claim “unequal access to strategic resources, such as employment and education, disproportionately affects peoples of color” (p. 129). However, this advantage often goes unnoticed by the group reaping the rewards.

White privilege is commonly overlooked and the dominant group is generally not taught how their privileged status affords them benefits in society (McIntosh, 1988). For instance, Peggy McIntosh (1998) maintains that white people are not actively aware of their advantages. Instead, whites are socialized and conditioned not to be conscious of this privilege, which is more often than not blatantly obvious to members of the minority groups. As McIntosh (1998) notes, it is “dizzying” to suddenly be taught of this imbalance and “hard to learn you are being de-centered when you were not aware of being central to begin with” (p. 7). Meanwhile, this factor also makes us prone to be unaware of the privileges given to the dominant group concerning character judgments in society.

It is not uncommon to unconsciously judge minority groups as less favorable, reliable, or honest in everyday life. This tendency is often due to engrained stereotypes that allow people to believe that it is just the way minority groups are “supposed to act” (Kottack & Kozaitis, 2012, p. 80). As McIntosh (1998) notices, “The bad behavior of a person of color, when it occurs or is thought to occur, is unfairly projected onto his or her entire group, whether it is the stereotype of inscrutable shiftiness attributed to Asian Americans, or the gangsterism attributed to Latino men…” (p. 4). However, we do not see a mass generalization applied to whites by the general public or media. Therefore, I wanted to
investigate the presence of white privilege in character judgments using Peggy McIntosh’s White Privilege Survey (1988).

METHOD

Participants

There were 329 total participants in the current study. Specifically, the data consists of the responses of 46 students enrolled in an undergraduate sociology course at a Midwestern university, as well as 283 participants from the general public, who were associates of the students. There were 190 females and 139 males. For the purposes of the study, it is important to note that of the total participants for all groups, approximately 75% labeled their race as white, 8% as Native American, 3% as African American, 3% as Asian, and 10% as two or more races. The sample was from a predominantly Midwestern population.

Design and Materials

The study used a correlational design to establish the relationship between the dependent variable of white privilege and the independent variable of race. In addition, gender differences in relation to reports of white privilege are also briefly examined. The survey used in this study is an abridged version of Peggy McIntosh’s White Privilege Survey (1988). The current survey consisted of 10 questions instead of the original 46 questions in order to use a more concise method of investigating the participants’ experience of white privilege. The hypothesis predicted that participants who identified as being a member of the white race would correlate with a greater level of white privilege, as would being male. In addition, it was predicted that there would be more perception of white privilege among the undergraduate groups than among the general public. This is due to the fact that these undergraduate participants were enrolled in a course that studied race and ethnic relations. Therefore, these participants may be more cognizant of white privilege and have a heightened awareness of these advantages. Thus, they would be more likely to be aware and report its occurrence.
Procedure

Students who were enrolled in a spring and fall semester undergraduate sociology course each completed the survey. Following the individual completion of the survey, each student recruited 10 associates from the general public to take part in the survey. The recruited participants consisted of fellow undergraduate students, as well as other associates of the students from across the state. The responses from the associate participants were compiled into a data set to represent the general public. In addition, all responses collected from each researcher were compiled in a database for further analysis. All participants verbally consented to taking part in the study and the data was recorded anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

For the purpose of this study, I focused my analysis on three particular questions: (2) “I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty assured that I won’t be followed or harassed by store staff.” (5) “I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.” (7) “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race” (questions 2, 5 and 7 of the abridged version of the survey). Participants rated the degree to which they agreed with the statement on a four-point scale, with 1 meaning strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 disagree, and 4 strongly disagree. A lower score indicated a greater presence of white privilege experienced by that participant. The three questions chosen for an in-depth analysis specifically concern the degree to which the public judges a person’s character to be favorable, reliable, and honest. As stated, I hypothesized that participants who identified as being a member of the white race would correlate with a greater level of white privilege. Therefore, I specifically predicted that white people in both the general public and undergraduate class would feel that their character is judged more favorably by those around them and would consequently be closer to “strongly agree” on the rating spectrum on all three of these questions. I also predicted that my responses and those of the fall 2014 class would show that I would be more likely to strongly agree than the averages of other races in the general public. Once again, this is because I would be more aware of the influence of white privilege and I would be more likely to notice and report its occurrence.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Public

As a whole, the general public displayed lower levels of white privilege compared to the undergraduates, but still widely experienced white privilege ($M=1.8601$). An average score of 1.8601 suggests that, on average, the general public agreed that they could function in everyday life without generally experiencing these setbacks, which indicates the influence of white privilege. However, this mean is greater than the mean for the rest of the sample, as it is approaching “disagree” on the Likert rating scale. For the three particular statements in question, the general public reported that they felt they could shop alone without being harassed ($M=1.6784$), could swear, dress in clothes, or not answer correspondence without feeling that these choices are attributed to the bad morals of their race ($M=1.9753$), and could do well in a difficult situation without just being called a credit to their race ($M=1.7138$).

For the purpose of this investigation, race is an important factor in the data analysis. The general public consisted of 73.48% identifying as white, 8.60% Native American, 3.58% African American, 3.23% Asian, and 11.11% as two or more races. Table 1 displays the differences in racial makeup of the samples. Clearly, the general public had a greater racial diversity in the sample than the undergraduate class. Therefore, the contrasting racial demographics exemplify the concept of white privilege, as demonstrated by the differences in results between the general public and rest of the sample discussed below.

Table 1: Percentage Race Composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>Fall 2014 Class</th>
<th>Spring 2013 Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>73.48</td>
<td>89.34</td>
<td>87.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>8.60</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*Note. Based on the data of 279 participants in the general public, 19 participants in the fall 2014 class, and 26 participants in the spring 2013 class.

**Fall Class Versus the General Public**

First, it is worth noting that for the three questions overall (combined spring 2013, General Public, fall 2014), whites leaned the most towards strongly agree on average, while African Americans were the farthest from strongly agreeing on the continuum (Figure 1). This demonstrates that white people, on average, are more likely to strongly agree that they will not be followed while shopping, will not have people negatively judge their character by their appearance or behavior in relation to their race, and won’t surprise people with their achievements compared to stereotypes of others of their race. Meanwhile, African Americans are the most likely to think they will be followed in a store, have others negatively judge their character by their appearance or behavior and apply these factors to their race, and excessively surprise people with their accomplishments.

![Figure 1: Mean Race Scores for Question 2, 5, and 7: All Groups](image)

There are noticeable similarities between the general public and our class’s responses. For instance, whites in the general public reported an average of 1.5659 for the shop statement, 1.8098 for the character statement, and 1.6000 for the statement concerning credit judgment. This indicates that whites are most likely to agree that they can shop without
being followed, will not be judged for their appearance and behavior in terms of their race, or will not be called a credit to their race for their accomplishments in the general public. This also coincided with the responses of whites in the fall 2014 class for the shop and character questions. Native Americans had one of the highest averages for each question between the general public and the fall 2014 class, meaning they are more likely than whites to think that they will be followed in a shop, may be judged for their appearance and behavior in terms of their race, and may be called a credit to their race for their accomplishments. For example, they scored 2.4583 in the general public and 2.000 for the fall 2014 class for the character question, versus 1.8098 and 1.7059 for whites.

However, there are noticeable differences between the general public and the class of 2014. There was a disparity particularly between the statement on being seen as a credit to their race between the general public and the fall 2014 class. For the general public, whites reported an average of 1.6000, while the fall 2014 class showed an average of 1.4706. This trend held true for all three questions, demonstrating that white undergraduates were more likely to agree to these statements that whites in the general public. Native Americans were also slightly more likely to agree to these statements in the fall 2014 class versus the general public. As a whole for all 10 questions of the White Privilege Survey (1988), the general public was more likely to feel that their race was used by society as a means of preemptively and unfairly judging them, as the general public had a higher overall mean than the fall class (M=1.8601, M=1.6850). However, the overall trend was similar to the responses of the fall 2014 class (Figure 2). As noted in Table 1, the general public had much greater racial diversity. Therefore, it makes sense that a greater number of those participants would be less likely to experience the unfair advantages allotted from white privilege, as more identified themselves as a racial minority in the general public. In addition, the undergraduates were enrolled in a course that studied race and ethnic relations and, therefore, would be more sensitive and aware of white privilege and would be more likely to report its occurrence, as discussed below.
The fact that the undergraduate classes are a “Race and Ethnic Relations” course and focuses on the relationship between these factors in our society may explain some of this variance. Mainly, this may raise awareness for white privilege among both the fall class and the spring class as well. Therefore, they may be more likely to strongly agree with these statements because we have furthered students’ education on this often unconscious and overlooked privilege. Students who consider themselves of the white race may be more aware of the benefits they have in society and therefore would be more likely to agree with the statements of the White Privilege Survey (1988). This inference is supported by a 2007 study conducted by Case, which discovered that courses in psychology designed to raise student awareness about racism showed an increased awareness of white privilege and an increase in white guilt after the end of the course. Thus, it is not unreasonable to believe that our course has a similar effect on the responses of the fall class, who would, therefore, be more sensitive and aware of white privilege and would be more likely to report its occurrence, as discussed below.
My Responses Versus the General Public

The interactions which form racial advantage and disadvantage occur at the individual level. Further, by examining the responses of an individual to these interactions, a closer understanding of other factors (such as gender) may emerge. As the research data was aggregated, I chose to use my own responses as a point for an individual comparison to the general public. In doing so, I acknowledge that my answers do reflect my status as a student in the area of study, but also point to a larger question of how gender intersects with racial interactions. A comparison of means also showed there were similarities between my own responses and that of the general public. I was also likely to be on the agreeing side of the continuum as I answered mostly 1 to the questions, which is similar to whites in the general public. However, I did have a lower average on the statements concerning shopping and being a credit to my race compared to other whites in the general public, meaning I was more likely to strongly agree to the statements in question. Although, I had a response of 2 to the statement “I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race,” while whites in the public only had an average of 1.8098. This indicates that I was less likely to strongly agree that I will not have my appearance or actions be negatively attributed to my race.

In addition, I recorded a lower response to all three questions compared to the average responses of the general public for every other race (although my score was equal to Asians for the character question). To demonstrate one particular difference, I recorded a 1 for the shop question, which contrasts with African Americans in the general public who recorded an average of 2.3000 to this question (Figure 3). In other words, African American’s are noticeably more inclined to believe that they cannot go shopping without being followed or harassed by store staff. As a whole, I had a mean of 1.1975, as compared to the mean score of the general public of 1.8601 (Figure 4). While it is unique to include my personal responses as the researcher in regards to the survey, it offers an individualized perspective on the social phenomenon in question – one that is often difficult to be aware of in relation to one’s own life.
Figure 3: My Scores Versus the General Public

Level of Disagreement
(1: Strongly Agree - 4: Strongly Disagree)

Me
White
African American

Figure 4: Mean Scores for Question 1-10: My Responses and General Public

Level of Disagreement
(1: Strongly Agree - 4: Strongly Disagree)

My Responses
General Public

White Privilege Survey Question
Gender Differences

One factor that may contribute to these differences between my scores and the general public responses is gender. Across all the groups, females reported slightly higher scores to the questions concerning shopping and character judgment than males (Figure 5). However, it’s interesting that males scored higher on the question concerning credit (1.6842 versus 1.7122). Therefore, females were more likely to think they would be followed in stores or judged by their race for their appearance and behavior, yet they are less likely to think that their achievement in a challenging situation will label them unusual for their race, and therefore, will not be called a credit to their race. Could this reflect the fact that females have more expectations placed on them in the first place? Further investigation is needed to help explain this difference. Due to the fact that I only deviated from the results shown by the analysis in my answer to the shop statement (I was more likely to agree than both males and females, while females overall were less likely to agree than males), I was fairly close to the trends shown with gender differences.

Figure 5: Gender Differences

![Bar chart showing gender differences in survey responses](chart.png)

- **White Privilege Survey Question**
  - Credit
  - Character
  - Shop

**Level of Disagreement (1: Strongly Agree - 4: Strongly Disagree)**

- Male
- Female
CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study displayed that white privilege exists among undergraduate students, as well as the general public. As stated earlier, the results showed that for all three questions whites leaned the most towards strongly agree on average, while African Americans were the farthest from strongly agreeing on the continuum for the combined spring 2013, general public, fall 2014. (Figure 1). This demonstrates that white people, on average, are more likely to have neither their positive nor their negative behaviors seen as racialized, and that any negative judgments would reflect only on the individual, not their race. On the other hand, African Americans are the most likely to think their appearance, achievements and valuation as trustworthy is based not on them individually, but on their race.

My hypothesis stated that the white race is more likely to feel their character judged more favorably by those around them than other racial groups, which is encompassed by the above three questions. According to my analysis in the preceding paragraph, my hypothesis held true for both the general public and the undergraduate classes. My hypothesis that I would be more likely to agree to all three questions than other races in the general public was also confirmed. In addition, the predictions that the general public would report less perception of white privilege than the undergraduate classes, as well as the tendency for females to experience less privilege, was supported, albeit narrowly. Therefore, the results illustrate that white privilege is alive in both society at large and in our individual class.

The research design has limitations that suggest that further study is needed. Firstly, this study only examines 10 questions from the original White Privilege Survey (McIntosh, 1989). Accordingly, this only provides a glimpse into the experience of white privilege among people. Secondly, a study that examines a larger and more diverse sample would be better able to see disparities in everyday experiences influenced by white privilege among differing races. While this current project is an accurate peek into the impacts of white privilege primarily among Midwest individuals, explorations into diverse contemporary populations would provide additional data.
In conclusion we can deduce that the overall findings strongly and clearly indicate white privilege is present in our class and general public. According to the hypothesis of this paper, this privilege also translates into the tendency for white people to be more likely to perceive the public to judge their character to be more favorable, reliable, and honest. This is especially true when comparing whites with African Americans or Native Americans. Accordingly, this illustrates the continuing problem of our society to unconsciously give white people a “knapsack full of special provisions” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 10). While this study concentrates on the often overlooked and unrealized benefits whites are privileged to in society, the demonstration that this discrepancy between races still exists can translate into a more perverse expression of this imbalance. Blatant acts of prejudice and discrimination that still find themselves expressed in society are obvious and outward manifestations of the subtle differences that this white privilege survey unveils. As Kottak and Kozaitis (2012) asserts, “This unequal treatment isn’t legal, but it happens anyway” (p. 80). Therefore, the first step to lessening the gap and decreasing these violent and regrettable acts of prejudice is to bring awareness to this imbalance, which is the advantageous purpose of the White Privilege Survey (1988).

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REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Abridged White Privilege Survey (McIntosh, 1988)

Please indicate whether you Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Disagree (3) or Strongly Disagree (4) with the following statements.

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my own race most of the time.
2. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty assured that I won’t be followed or harassed by store staff.
3. I can turn on the television and see people of my race widely represented.
4. When I am told about our national heritage or “civilization” I am shown that people of my race made it was it is.
5. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
6. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
7. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
8. Whether I use a debit card, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of my financial reliability.
9. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.
10. I can choose public accommodation or an apartment without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the place I have chosen.
11. My gender is: ___Female ___ Male
12. My age is: _____
14. My ethnicity is: _____ European _____ Hispanic ______ African _____Asian _____Indigenous ____Other