

# Editorials

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# Studying whites can help race relations

U of M survey shows they have an awareness of privilege.

It's become a predictable outcome in studies on race in America: Send equally equipped black people and white people out into society and see who is followed in the department store. Or stopped by police. Or rejected for a loan. Countless studies have been done on people of color and the effects of racism and discrimination. But what about the white person who gets better service at the market or a warning instead of an arrest? The historical assumption has been that whites don't think much about their own racial identity because as part of the dominant culture, they don't have to.

Yet a recent — and somewhat controversial — University of Minnesota survey shows that view is changing. By examining white attitudes, the study offers hope for improving race relations. Time and again, studies have shown that racially biased practices continue in everything from courts policing to housing to employment. Why?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in a deeper understanding of white attitudes. That's the reasonable theory behind university sociologists' telephone survey of 2,000 people (half white and half not). Researchers found

that 74 percent of whites said their own racial identity is important to them and that they benefit from it. A significant majority believe that access to education and social connections explains some racial disparities, and that prejudice and discrimination also explained some of the differences.

That's encouraging. It demonstrates awareness among whites that ours is not yet a strictly colorblind, merit-based society. And though important legal strides toward fairness have been made, attitudes of superiority and prejudice (even subconscious ones) still affect behavior.

Deeper understanding of all groups' perceptions of racial identity is important. Knowing how white Americans view race, ethnicity and culture can broaden honest discussion and change attitudes. No one should be afraid of that sort of research.

“You can't deal with the problems of race and inequality by just looking at the disadvantaged,”

Sociologist Doug Hartmann, co-author of the U of M whiteness survey.

U of M survey shows they have an awareness of privilege.