



THE MEANING OF WHITE

How important is your racial identity to you? Researchers long thought it wasn't that crucial to whites. But a groundbreaking new study on whiteness and race relations by University of Minnesota sociologists shows that whites in the U.S. are far more conscious of being white—and the privileges it brings—than was believed.

The survey is packed with fascinating findings, some surprising (a stunning proportion of whites—77%—say their race has a distinct culture that should be preserved) and some less so (whites view their role in the social hierarchy more benignly than blacks and Hispanics do). Whites are more likely to say prejudice and discrimination put blacks at a disadvantage than to say those factors contribute to white advantage. And they are much less likely than nonwhites to attribute inequality to bias in the legal system.

What to make of all this? Though whites in the U.S. believe there remain advantages to being white, they don't necessarily link those advantages with blacks' disadvantages. This hinders racial reconciliation, says co-author Douglas Hartmann: "Whites have invented subtle ways to convince themselves that race isn't a problem in America." Blacks do see more racism in society than whites but, contrary to stereotype, seem disinclined to blame the system for their disadvantage. In fact, they are more likely to attribute it to individual causes like a lack of hard work—77% did so, compared with 62% of whites. "We think of U.S. minorities as less engaged in American individualism," Hartmann says, "but they are maybe more so." —By *Jeninne Lee-St. John*