# White privilege: Contextualising and teaching Peggy McIntosh's work in post-Apartheid South Africa

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Pursuing the Common Good through Dialogue and Recognition*

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5. Conclusions for moral education
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# A developing theory of change

1. "Solidarity or social appreciation": empathy, selflessness, vision of nation/future (Juul, 2010, p. 266)
2. Seeing (recognition) the costs of inequality and injustice, and knowing (contact) those hurt by them (Juul, 2010)
3. Restoring personhood (dignity, opportunity, means, memory, equality and citizenship) (Swartz & Scott, 2012)
4. Consciousness-raising so that the individual becomes connected with and aware of structural impacts of their historical context (McIntosh, 1989).
5. Overcoming shame/self-blame: The impact of structural and symbolic violence (normalisation leading to internalization) (Sawyer, 2005; Swartz et al, 2009).
6. Self-authorship: "The marginalized understand best how they can be assisted, what roles they must play, and the nature of systems to introduce" (Biko, 2002; Muchie, Osha & Matlou, 2012, p. 14)

# Encountering Peggy

- 1989 article traces her own coming to realize her unexamined, unearned, invisible knapsack of privilege conferred on her by her (white) race in relation to her African American colleagues in a women's study department at a US college

- She writes how privilege is denied, protected and unexamined. She lists 42 instances she discovered in her own life

1. I can go shopping alone most of the time pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed
2. When I am told about our national heritage or 'civilisation' I am shown that people of my color made it what it is"
3. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability
4. Never called 'a credit' to my 'race'
5. Never speak for all my 'race'
6. "Person in charge" is of my 'race'
7. Cards, toys, plasters, educational materials and publications - in my skin colour
8. Never accused of having a 'soft job'
9. Bad day never race-related
10. Ensured civility of neighbours
11. Music, food and haircuts
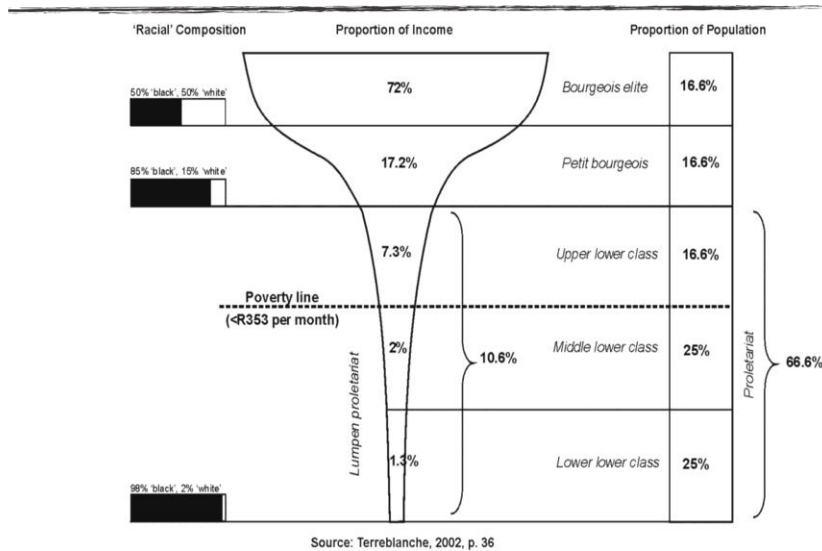12. Swear or dress scruffily never disparaged for my 'race'

## Classroom, context and key questions

1. Whose problem is racism, and how should it be overcome? (The Black consciousness Project)
2. Shouldn't we rather deal with inequality and poverty rather than race (especially in university admissions policies and employment equity)?
3. Models to aim for: assimilation, accommodation (multiculturalism) or cosmopolitan nationalism (a new identity)?

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# Inequality in South Africa

| 'Racial' Composition | Proportion of Income | | Proportion of Population | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 50% 'black', 50% 'white' | 72% | Bourgeois elite | 16.6% | |
| 85% 'black', 15% 'white' | 17.2% | Petit bourgeois | 16.6% | |
| | 7.3% | Upper lower class | 16.6% | |
| Poverty line (<R353 per month) | | | | |
| | 2% | Middle lower class | 25% | |
| | 10.6% | | | 66.6% |
| 98% 'black', 2% 'white' | 1.3% | Lower lower class | 25% | |

Lumpen proletariat · Proletariat

Source: Terreblanche, 2002, p. 36

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# Poverty and inequality v. Racial power and privilege

"... **framing redress in racial terms** only is **not the strategically** most effective way of **securing white people's compliance**. Where possible then, **redress is least likely to face resistance** where measures that serve to redress racial inequities can be phrased as **anti-poverty measures** rather than as means of **reversing racial power and privilege**"

(Friedman and Erasmus cited in Habib & Bentley, 2008, p. 346)
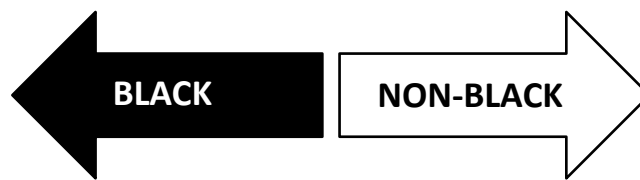
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## The Black Consciousness Project

Please divide yourself into two groups: 'Black' and 'not Black'.
Appoint a scribe, and discuss the following two questions:

1. What are the effects of racism?
2. What should be done about it?

**BLACK** **NON-BLACK**

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## Multiculturalism v. Cosmopolitan nationalism?

"The nation … is defined for a historical
moment by all who want to be a part of it. This
is a vision of **cosmopolitan nationalism. …it
comes with responsibilities. … feelings of
solidarity, and willingness** by the **advantaged**
of all colours, to sacrifice a little for the
inclusion of the marginalised" (Habib and
Bentley, 2008, p. 352)

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# Methodology

# The Assignment

1. Biographical paragraph – 'how society identifies you'
2. List five privileges of race, class, gender or sexuality you have in relation to another group
3. Reflections on exercise – 'how did it feel listing your privileges?'
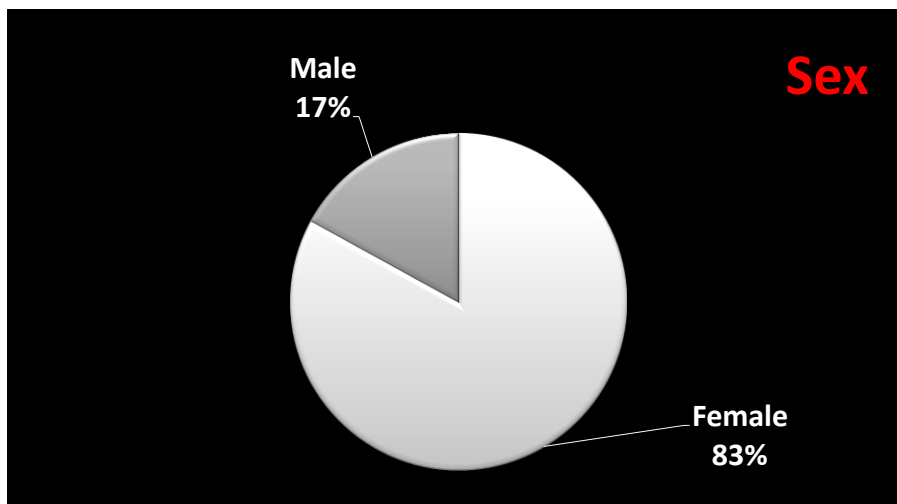
## The Class

1. Sociology class on 'Race, Class and Gender'
2. University of Cape Town
3. 2$^{nd}$ and 3$^{rd}$ year undergraduate level
4. 2/3 South African students (equal nos. of black, coloured and white)
5. 1/6 'semester abroad' students from Global North
6. 1/6 other African students students
7. Assignment as a course requirement
8. Ethics – opt out clause; confidentiality

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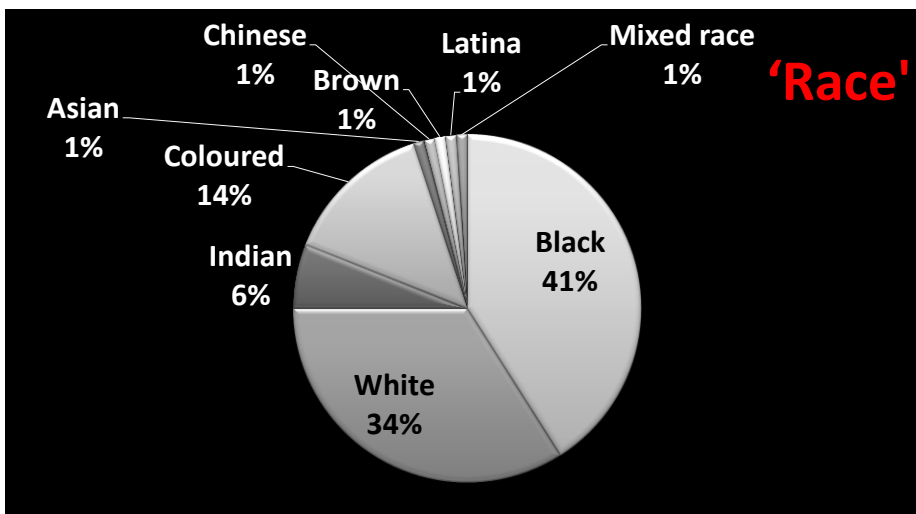Research Council

## Demographics of class (n=152)



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## Demographics of class (n=152)

Sexuality

- Bisexual 1%
- Did not disclose 3%
- Homosexual 4%
- Heterosexual 92%

## Demographics of class (n=152)

'Race'

- Chinese 1%
- Latina 1%
- Mixed race 1%
- Brown 1%
- Asian 1%
- Coloured 14%
- Indian 6%
- Black 41%
- White 34%

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# Demographics of class (n=152)



**Geography**

- Other African countries 12%
- China 1%
- Europe 8%
- Russia 1%
- USA 16%
- South Africa 62%

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# Demographics of class (n=152)



**'Class'**

- Depends 14%
- Lower 10%
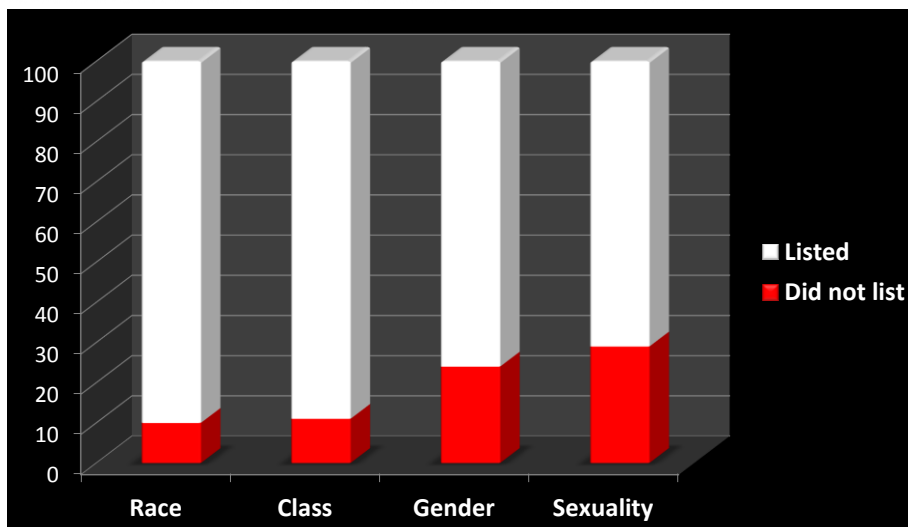- Upper 37%
- Middle 39%

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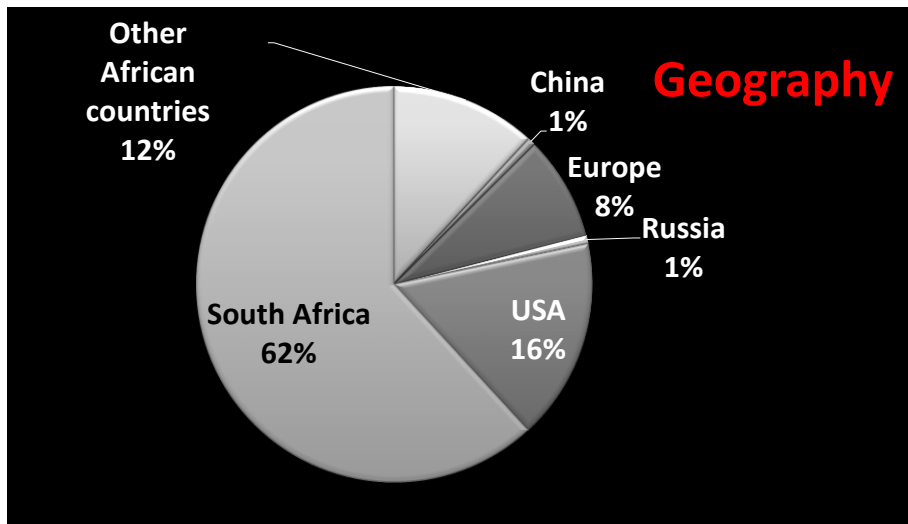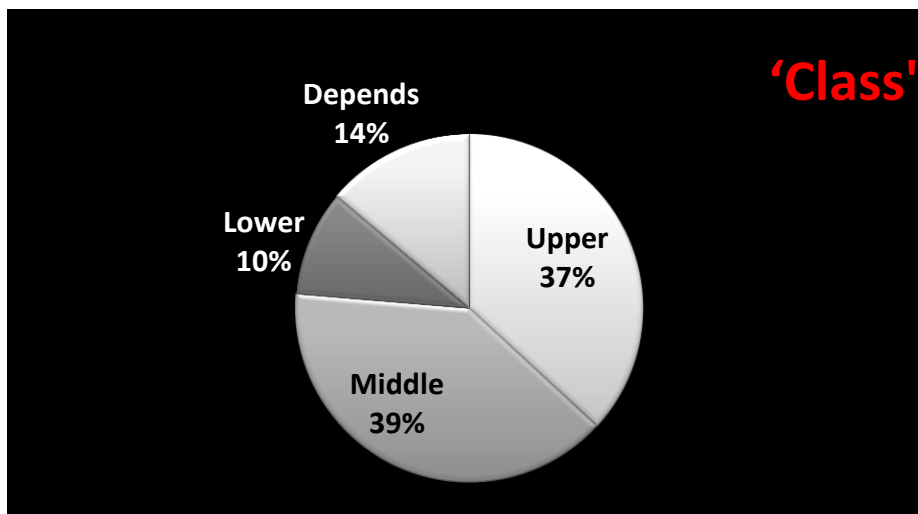
## Initial Findings: Perceptions of Racial Privilege

1. AA raised as issues that privilege black people in SA
2. Frequently spoke of 'Complicated Race' – not fitting into categories
3. Perceptions of privilege that changed with context
4. Black but benefited from white privilege due to proximity to white people growing up
5. Local pronouncements – 'In Kenya there is no white privilege'
6. "I'm just Norwegian its only when I travel that I am white"
7. "In Zimbabwe my race was irrelevant"
8. More excluded racial privilege than other categories of privilege

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## Identifying privilege (n=152)



Legend: Listed, Did not list
Categories: Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality

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# Recognising 'racial' privilege (1)

What I have learned from this exercise is that **I do benefit from unearned privileges that white people receive in South Africa because of the colour of my skin** but I also benefit from that affirmative action is in place in South Africa because I am previously disadvantaged as well.

It was not an easy task reflecting on my life like this and realising all these things that we have to do and **how we have to constantly rely on race and categorising ourselves to achieve things in this country**.

**Benefiting from one side or the other has massive effects psychologically because you do not know where you truly belong** and constantly have to place yourself somewhere to make sense of your life and surroundings and how people and society will treat you (**Coloured female student, South Africa**)

# Recognising of 'racial' privilege (2)

**My racial position in society is quite complicated**. Society positions me as 'coloured' as they would label almost anyone who is mixed race. **My mother is racially positioned as an Indian in society and my father is racially positioned as a coloured** in society. For this reason I am naturally labeled as 'coloured'. Automatically, when looking at me people assume that I am Indian. However, on my identity document it labels me as a coloured. Nevertheless, I find that **I use whichever race is favoured to my advantage**. However, I do identify with both races, thus making it difficult to distinguish between which race I am more comfortable with **(Coloured/Indian female student, South Africa)**

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## Recognising 'racial' privilege (3)

"The fact however, that I am "**coloured" and not "black", situates me higher up on the "racial hierarchy".** When considering race within society as a whole… there is still the stance from society that "white is right". **Through media, and older generations who still reason in line with previous ideologies on race** (especially under Apartheid), many still conform to systems of "white" hegemony. Race can constitute as a concept of privilege as well. With post Apartheid policies such as Affirmative Action (AA) and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), people of colour get an advantage over "white" individuals in terms of admissions into universities, as well as employment in the workplace. Privilege is therefore contextual, and I, as a coloured individual, may have an upper hand over "white" individuals in this way"
**(Coloured female South African student)**

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## Recognising privilege (4)

"I realized that my privileges are many but to some extent are limited to society's view of me. **This exercise showed me how some people see me differently because of their disadvantages**. It was not that easy to write about how I am so privileged (to a certain extent) as opposed to someone else who does not even know what it is like to experience such liberty. Yet at the same time I noticed **how my privileges disadvantage other people** (for example; my white friends—who could not be admitted to UCT because of their race)." (**Black male student, South Africa**)

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## Feeling discomfort (1)

"Writing this paper has been quite difficult as **I did not realise how much unearned privilege I have acquired, even though it seems that I use them to my advantage on a daily basis**. Lately, **I have felt like South Africa has entered a period of reverse racism** due to the fact that black people receive preferential treatment through Affirmative Action and BEE. **However**, looking at my life critically, it **seems that I have so many unearned privileges that I was not fully aware of**. I took for granted that I have received an **internationally recognized high school education, that I live in a safe suburban area and that I have grown up with economic stability** with my parents. It seems like reading an article and really applying it to your own life seems essential in really understanding how unearned privilege has really not been beneficial for human development"
(**White female student, South Africa**)

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## Feeling discomfort… and starting change (2)

"I felt more at ease with beginning to acknowledge these undeserved privileges … and thus when I found my own examples began to more clearly see how these **privileges are in fact subtly part of my everyday life**. I always considered myself as completely not racist and as an egalitarian, however **this task taught me to understand the reasons and justification as to why I am seen as part of an oppressive race**; it also taught me that **by denying having these unearned privileges, is in fact racist and continuing oppression**. I found the quote "**we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way**" (McIntosh, 1995, p. 70) particularly relevant… **instead of feeling defensive, I have to take it upon myself as a duty to acknowledge these unearned privileges exist, that they do personally affect my lif**e"(**White female student, South Africa**)

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# Exhibiting blind spots (1)

The society that I was brought up in was different to the one they have here in South Africa where race is a big issue. **Living in Kenya there was not "white privileges"** as everyone seemed to **have equal rights and individuals were not defined by their race**. I am an Indian living in an African country… I attended a white British school not only with whites but Africans as well as different race **(Indian female student, Kenya)**

In **Norway the society sees me as a pure Norwegian**. I have never been question about my nationality, or my racial background. Looking back at the society that I belong to I realize that we do not divide our population in race, but rather by nationality. The only time **I feel white is when I have been traveling** (**white female student, Norway**)

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# Exhibiting blind spots (2)

**In Zimbabwe my race was irrelevant "**and **I hardly ever thought of it**, but in South Africa due to the close interlinking between race and class, as well as affirmative action and the emphasis placed on race in this society, my race became of relevance" **(Black female Zimbabwean student)**

As I was growing up **I spent the majority of my time around white people**. This allowed me to be introduced to a network of people who couldn't judge me based on my skin colour because of who I knew… her contacts became accessible to me. The way I speak has benefited me greatly. I was always different to them (them being other black people). I could go as far as to say that **white privilege has in my case benefited** me rather than oppressed me" **(Black male student, South Africa)**

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# Privilege blindspots

1. It was surprising to see how many students in relatively 'oppressed' positionalities listed privileges that they have over the perceived oppressor.
2. A number of students refused to acknowledge their privilege
3. Individual privilege masked systemic privilege:

> "Focusing on the 'unearned' can obscure the deliberate design of **systems** that allow the invisible knapsack to come into being" (**Coloured male student, South African**).

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# From Personal Privilege to 'Systemic' privilege

"To redesign social systems, we need first to acknowledge their colossal **unseen dimensions**. The **silences and denials** surrounding privilege **are the key political tool here**. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects…. (McIntosh, 1989, p. 5)

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## From Personal Privilege to 'Systemic' privilege (2)

"Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about **equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance** while denying that systems of dominance exist… It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the US so as to maintain **the myth of meritocracy**, the myth that **democratic choice** is equally available to all.

Keeping **most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people [and]** props up those in power and **serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already**."
(McIntosh, 1989, p. 5)

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## Conclusions for moral education

1. McIntosh a useful **methodology** for contextualising, talking of and disrupting privilege
2. Translates **theory** into **practice**
3. Speaking of **experience** rather than opinion levels the playing fields, ends futile debates
4. Concentrating on **privilege** can **obscure** and minimize experiences of **oppression**
5. **Using the classroom…???**

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# Some theoretical directions

1. **Kyriarchy** (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983): interconnected and interacting systems in which individuals are oppressed and submissive in some contexts, while oppressing and dominating in others. (Greek meaning 'lordship') from feminist theologian
2. **Discomfort** (Davis & Steyn, 2013) - a GOOD thing in social justice classroom settings, as opportunities for learning
3. **Conflation of categories**: Intentionally separating class and race, poverty and race.
4. Interrogating  both **multiculturalism** and '**cosmopolitan nationalism**' (Habib & Bentley, 2008, p. 352)

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