



# People accounting: Social category-based choice <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper presents *people accounting*—a hypothesis that describes how a simple numerical imbalance in representation along nominal social category lines can affect people's choice of candidates in highly competitive situations (e.g., awards, jobs, etc.). For example, two scholarship finalists from California and New York may be equally qualified, but the award-winning chance for the California candidate will drop precipitously if 8 of the past 10 winners were from California. Studies 1–3 illustrate this effect. Study 4 links *people accounting* to intergroup fairness concerns and suggests that *people accounting* is more likely to occur when the category dimension is meaningful (e.g., Stanford/Princeton) than when it is not (e.g., left/right-handedness). Study 5 shows that candidates from overrepresented categories (e.g., “Californians”) must achieve higher minimum standards in order to be selected. The implication is that highly competitive decisions are often influenced by headcounts along mundane social category lines.

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## Introduction

While affirmative action has changed the way we allocate resources on the basis of race and gender (Chen, 2006; Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen, 2006), affirmative action policies make no special provisions for “students from Stanford,” “faculty with PhDs from Rice,” or “applicants from the East Coast”—that is utterly absurd. Yet, when selecting a winner from a highly competitive pool, our choices frequently become vulnerable to the dynamics of social category lines, even rather tepid and nominal ones. For instance, imagine that a West Coast student is applying for a national dissertation award. If this student makes the

short list along with another equally qualified applicant from the East Coast, then the West Coast student's chance of winning is 50%. However, imagine further that 8 of the last 10 winners were West Coast students. Under these circumstances, the West Coast applicant's award-winning chance is likely to fall dramatically, as fairness concerns shift from the interpersonal to the intergroup level. Thus, above and beyond the narrow policy of affirmative action, the present analysis addresses a far broader phenomenon—how simple numerical imbalances in social category representation shape our allocation decisions. And to our knowledge, this effect, which we all arguably recognize in this distilled form, has not been discussed in the literature.

We hypothesize that a numerical imbalance in social category representation, just like the one portrayed above, prompts individuals to consider the relative representation of social categories when deciding resource allocations in highly competitive situations. We call this process *people accounting*—a hypothesis about social category-based choice. We derive this hypothesis from the existing and intersecting literatures on social categorization, fairness, and choice.

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### Social categorization

Social categorization describes the process by which individuals perceive others as social categories (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). If some individuals are wearing blue shirts and others red, we no longer see these individuals as a monolithic aggregate of individuals but rather as distinct clusters of “red shirt” and “blue shirt” individuals. Self-categorization (Abrams, 1992; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Turner et al., 1987), which emphasizes the cognitive aspects of social identity (Deaux, 1996; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), is the social categorization of the self. For instance, psychologists at a conference are likely to categorize themselves and colleagues as “psychologists” when outside the conference venue but perhaps in terms of their “university affiliation” when inside.

One precondition of social categorization is social category *salience*, and one important lever of salience is the “separateness and clarity” (Rosch, 1978) of the categories, or the extent to which there is similarity within groups and differences between them (McGarty, 1999; Turner et al., 1987). For instance, to an American observer, the social category line between Britons and the Chinese is more salient than between Britons and Canadians (Buss & Portnoy, 1967), as the similarity within groups and differences between them is greater in the former than latter case (although such differences are naturally context-dependent). Still, numerical imbalance is another lever of salience. Although numerical minority–majority manipulations may or may not increase salience among participants (Turner et al., 1987), such manipulations do make social category lines salient from the observer’s perspective (Turner et al., 1987)—the perspective of the present analysis. We next explore the implications of social categorization for the perception of fairness.

### Social categorization and fairness

One research stream has begun to chronicle the effects of social category memberships on distributive fairness (e.g., Garcia, Tor, Bazerman, & Miller, 2005; Platow, Mills, & Morrison, 2000; Wenzel, 2001). For instance, entities which are categorized as equals are treated as equals (Perelman, 1963), and Wenzel (2001) further suggests that social categories are entities which are subject to these same distributive dynamics. When distributions occur between groups on similar or equal footing, the guiding allocation principle becomes equality. Indeed, even earlier research on micro and macrojustice makes a similar point “that there should be an appropriate balance kept between the average allocations to two different subgroups of the total population” (Brickman, Folger, Goode, & Schul, 1981, p. 190). Because social categories influence our perceptions of distributive fairness (Wenzel, 2001), so too may *people accounting*—similarly focused on distributions—be guided by a concern for fairness. Hence, when individuals note a numerical imbalance in representation between comparable social cat-

egories, the social categorization and fairness literature clearly suggests that the concern for fairness shifts from the interpersonal to the intergroup level, prompting individuals to correct an imbalance by promoting equality between groups. While social categorization thus impacts fairness, we next explore how it impacts choice.

### Categories and choice

Relevant research that has specifically examined the relationship between categories and choice—the essence of our focus—is the *mental accounting* literature (Thaler, 1999, 1990). This psychological theory of choice explains the irrational aspects of behavioral finance. One particularly pertinent principle is the notion that the cognitive labeling of “mental accounts” undermines the fungibility or substitutability of money (Thaler, 1999). Simple labels such as “income” vs. “windfall” will determine whether individuals save or spend money. For example, individuals will drive across town to save \$5 for a \$15 item but not for a \$125 one (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) because of the “big savings” in the former case and “small savings” in the latter.

Articulating the role of “categorization” in budgeting, Thaler (1999) provides a taxonomy of budgetary categories: “expenditures are grouped into budgets (e.g., food, housing, etc.); wealth is allocated into accounts (e.g., checking, pension, ‘rainy day’); and income is divided into categories (e.g., regular or windfall)” (Thaler, 1999, p. 193). While this theory predicts financial behavior, its crux also applies to understanding how categories in general, including social ones, impact choice. The category “label” that is attached to money affects the choice on whether to spend or save that money. Similarly, social category “labels” can be assigned to individual candidates, through social categorization, and affect decision makers’ choice of one individual over another.

From the intersection of the social categorization, fairness, and choice literatures, we derive the *people accounting hypothesis*. A numerical imbalance in social category representation, triggering social categorization, can transfer fairness concerns at the interpersonal level, between two equally qualified candidates in a highly competitive situation, to the intergroup level, between the two social categories that the candidates represent. Consequently, headcounts along social category lines should affect the selection of highly competitive candidates, as individuals equalize imbalances in social category representation.

### Study 1

Study 1 probes for evidence of the *people accounting hypothesis* by creating a numerical imbalance in the representation of two social categories and then asking individuals to what extent they would feel pressure selecting one candidate over another by comparing the *people accounting condition* to a *control condition*. If people are sensitive to numerical imbalances in social category representation,

then we would expect them to admit feeling more pressure to avoid an individual candidate from an over-represented, nominal social category.

### Participants

A total of 27 undergraduates from the University of Michigan volunteered to participate in a brief between-subjects questionnaire study.

### Procedure

Participants in the *people accounting condition* read the following: “Every year the American Psychology Society gives a prestigious award to the graduate student with the best dissertation. For the past 10 years, 8 of the 10 winners have been graduate students from Stanford University. For this year’s competition, to what extent would you feel some pressure to avoid selecting a graduate student from Stanford? (1, no pressure at all; 7, a lot of pressure).” The *control condition* was slightly modified: “For the past 10 years, none of the 10 winners have been graduate students from Stanford University.”

### Results and discussion

As predicted, participants in the *people accounting condition* felt significantly more pressure to avoid Stanford students ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ ) than did participants in the *control condition* ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ,  $F(1,25) = 9.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This finding suggests that an implied numerical imbalance makes social category membership sufficiently salient, prompting individuals to tabulate headcounts along social category lines. Consequently, these salient social categories, notably apolitical ones (e.g., stanford and non-stanford), appear to increase the pressure to avoid choosing individuals based on social category membership. Even though this finding is consistent with the *people accounting hypothesis*, we acknowledge that some might question whether the phrase “pressure to avoid” created a demand. Nevertheless, to build more converging evidence, Study 2 examines whether or not people actually choose an individual from one social category over another.

### Study 2

Study 2 aims to demonstrate *people accounting* by using a choice paradigm where individuals are asked to make a choice. The *people accounting condition* makes social category lines salient by highlighting a numerical imbalance, whereas the *control condition* does not. If people are concerned with equalizing a numerical imbalance and if social category labels affect choice, then we would expect participants to be less willing to choose an individual from an over-represented social category than an under-represented one.

### Participants

A total of 174 undergraduates from the University of Michigan participated in a “Questionnaire Day” for \$8. The key materials for this between-subjects study were embedded in the packet which required approximately 45 min to complete.

### Procedure

Participants in the *people accounting condition* read about a job search for new faculty in which the focal social category dimension was the PhD granting institution (e.g., where three of five faculty received PhDs from Rice University): “Imagine you are deciding to hire a new psychology professor in the area of intergroup relations. But first, here is some background information about the current faculty” (last name, where PhD was earned, and research area): Prof. Fiske, Rice University, Stereotyping; Prof. Darley, Yale University, Moral Behavior; Prof. Shelton, University of Virginia, Person Perception, Prof. Cooper, Rice University, Attitudes; Prof. Shafir, Rice University, Decision Making

Participants were then told, “Now, here are the top candidates for the position in intergroup relations.” At this point, participants saw, “Adams, Rice University, Intergroup Disputes” and “Smith, U.C. Berkeley, Intergroup Trust,” and were asked, “Based only on the limited information above, which one of the two candidates above would you recommend the department hire? (Adams or Smith).”

The *control condition* was identical, except that no information was given regarding PhD granting institution of the current faculty. Another *people accounting condition* counterbalanced the university affiliation (i.e., U.C. Berkeley was over-represented and Adams was from U.C. Berkeley and Smith from Rice).

### Results and discussion

Results were consistent with the prediction. In the *control condition*, 55% chose Adams, whereas only 34% chose Adams in the *people accounting condition*, when Adams was from the over-represented university ( $\chi^2 (N = 174) = 7.9$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results again suggest that an imbalance in social category representation triggers the *people accounting* process such that individuals’ allocation choices become based on a candidate’s rather banal social category label and less on the candidate’s unique qualifications.

One possible counter-explanation, however, is that participants are not concerned with fairness at the intergroup level per se but rather concerned with having too many PhDs from the same institution. While intellectual homogeneity is a legitimate concern for many academic faculties, it is unlikely that our undergraduate participants were thinking in these pedagogical terms. Still, one could also argue that perhaps people chose the member of the under-repre-

sented social category because they inferred that past selection must have ignored merit if there are too many people from the same university, as if the hiring were rigged. Study 3 thus aims to establish additional evidence of *people accounting* by providing more information about the candidates in a context that precludes the possibility of a rigged or flawed selection system.

### Study 3

Study 3 attempts to show how a numerical imbalance in representation can lead to social category-based choice in a choice setting that includes more unique information about the candidates, in contrast to the minimal information conveyed in Studies 1 and 2. Study 3 also uses real ethnic minority social categories (e.g., African Americans and Latinos) as the alternatives in the choice set. Even with these politically charged minority social categories, we predict that, when a numerical imbalance makes social category lines salient, people will correct this imbalance in the direction of the under-represented social category relative to the over-represented one.

#### Participants

A total of 41 undergraduates from the University of Michigan who were not African American or Latino participated in a “Questionnaire Day” for \$8. The key materials for this between-subjects study were embedded in the packet which required approximately 45 min to complete.

#### Procedure

In a between-subjects design, participants were asked to imagine that they were high school teachers and that a fellow colleague was retiring from the high school faculty after 20 years of service. This scenario depicted either an African American (“Charles Anderson”) or a Latino American (“Carlos Hernandez”) who was retiring, leaving behind “only 1 African American, 12 Caucasians, and 4 Latino Americans” or “only 1 Latino American, 12 Caucasians, and 4 African Americans,” respectively.

Participants were then prompted, “As a faculty member of the social studies department, you can express feedback about whom to hire in (Charles/Carlos’) position. We have narrowed down the pool to two candidates whose resumes are on the following page.” Participants then saw a choice of two candidates and were asked, “Which of the following candidates would you hire next? (circle candidate A or B)” One candidate was African American (“David M. Johnson”) and another candidate Latino (“Arturo Torres”). Resumes for both candidates included information such as “Relevant Experience” (e.g., previous courses taught, teaching awards, and number of years as a teacher) and “Education” (e.g., undergraduate degrees, majors, and institutions). Research assistants, who were familiar with strong high school teacher qualifications, were asked to design these

different but comparably accomplished resumes. Photos of the candidates appeared directly above their resume information and the placement of the photos was also counter-balanced so that each candidate was associated with both resumes.

### Results and discussion

As predicted, when “Charles Anderson” retires from the department, leaving behind only one other African American colleague, 83% of the participants chose the African American replacement (“David M. Johnson”) and 17% chose the Latino candidate (“Arturo Torres”). However, when “Carlos Hernandez” retires from the department, leaving behind only one other Latino colleague, 52% of the participants chose the Latino replacement and 48% chose the African American ( $\chi^2(N=41)=5.5, p<.05$ ). Thus, these results suggest that the *people accounting* process systematically denies one social category in favor of the other solely on the basis of social category membership, and the direction of the numerical imbalance dictates the social category-based choice. Interesting too, this *people accounting* effect survives even when the selection context is one of replacement, a context that precludes the counter-explanation of a past rigged system. When the imbalance shows that Latinos are over-represented relative to African Americans, individuals choose African Americans; when the imbalance shows that African Americans are over-represented relative to Latinos, individuals choose Latinos.

### Study 4

While an imbalance in social category representation may amplify intergroup fairness concerns (Brickman et al., 1981; Wenzel, 2001) and trigger *people accounting*, any imbalance along social category lines is not sufficient; the social category lines must be meaningful. Work on the illusory correlation and group membership offers a framework for understanding when a social category becomes more or less meaningful (McGarty, 1999, 2002). In order for an illusory correlation “to be maximized there must be expectations that the groups are separable and coherent” (McGarty, 1999, p. 173), and the search for differences between social categories is a necessary precondition for the illusory correlation (Haslam, McGarty, & Brown, 1996). The implication for the present analysis is that people will likely impute a more meaningful distinction in an allocation context when the social category at hand might, in some reasonable way, be relevant to the context. For example, in the allocation context of an international dissertation award, it is conceivable that there might be some illusory correlation between a successful candidate and “university” or “continent” but certainly less so for “handedness.” Consequently, “university” and “continent” would be more meaningful social categories than “handedness” in this allocation context.

Study 4, thus, aims to test the prediction that *people accounting* is more likely to be triggered on a meaningful social category dimension vs. a less meaningful one. Study 4 also aims to link the *people accounting* tendencies to a concern for fairness and tests the complementary prediction that individuals become more concerned with fairness when the dimension is meaningful than when it is not. Moreover, Study 4 also uses a within-subjects design to underscore the strength of people's preferences, an experimental setting that is recognized for informing the participants of all the options (Bazerman, Loewenstein, & White, 1992; Camerer, 1995).

### Participants

Two within-subjects samples were recruited at the University of Michigan by e-mail to participate in an online survey. The first sample of 75 undergraduates was asked to rate the likelihood that they would *choose* one candidate over another, and the second sample of 56 undergraduates provided ratings of their concern for *fairness*. We also note that online data collections for decision-making experiments tend to produce similar results as in-person ones (Birnbaum, 1999), with the added benefit of capturing a more diverse sample (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).

### Procedure in choice likelihood

Participants in the choice likelihood conditions read, "As we all know, a choice between two finalists for an international undergraduate award is difficult in highly competitive situations, because, at that level, both would essentially be equally qualified. Please respond to these three scenarios as if you were a member of the selection committee..." Participants then responded to three randomly presented questions about three social category lines that varied in meaningfulness (*handedness/continent/university*). The *handedness* (left vs. right) version read as follows: "Suppose that for 8 of the last 10 years, the award has always gone to a left-handed finalist. For this year's competition, if you had a choice between two equally qualified finalists, one left-handed and the other right-handed, how likely would you choose the left-handed finalist?" On a 7-point scale, participants indicated their likelihood of choosing the over-represented social category (1, highly unlikely; 7, highly likely). The *continent* (Europe vs. Asia) and *university* (Princeton vs. Stanford) dimensions were similar, except the award had always gone to a finalist from "Europe" or "Princeton."

### Procedure in concern for fairness ratings

The second sample read the identical scenarios but responded to a question about fairness about each, randomly presented, social category dimension (*handedness/continent/university*). For example, the *handedness* version asked, "For this year's competition, if you had a choice between two equally qualified finalists, one left-handed and

the other right-handed, to what extent would you be more concerned about fairness than ever before? (1, not concerned, 7, very concerned)."

## Results and discussion

As predicted, the likelihood of choosing an individual from an over-represented category depended on the meaningfulness of the social category: *handedness* ( $M=3.87$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ) vs. *continent* ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ) and *university* ( $M=3.47$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ,  $F(2,148)=4.45$ ,  $p<.05$ ). A complementary pattern emerges from the fairness ratings. As predicted, concern for fairness depended on the meaningfulness of the unbalanced social category dimension: *handedness* ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=2.12$ ) vs. *continent* ( $M=4.55$ ,  $SD=1.96$ ) and *university* ( $M=4.63$ ,  $SD=1.80$ ,  $F(2,110)=18.4$ ,  $p<.001$ ). These results suggest that individuals are more likely to become more concerned with fairness and engage in social category-based choice when an imbalance in representation occurs along geographical or university lines than handedness. Thus, *people accounting* requires that the social category dimension be a sufficiently meaningful one.

### Study 5

If our analysis is correct, one implication of *people accounting* is that the standards shift according to the representation of the social categories at hand. For instance, if 8 of the past 10 winners of an award have been from California, *people accounting* would suggest that the minimum standards required for yet another winner from California would be elevated in order to justify a selection from the over-represented category. Study 5 tests the prediction that the minimum GPA for an over-represented "California" applicant will be greater in the *people accounting condition*, compared to a *control condition*.

### Participants

A total of 48 undergraduates from the University of Michigan were recruited to participate in a between-subjects study. Participants were recruited by e-mail to respond to an online decision-making survey.

### Procedure

Participants in the *people accounting condition* read the following: "As we all know, a choice between two finalists for an international undergraduate scholarship is difficult in highly competitive situations, because, at that level, both would essentially be equally qualified. Suppose that for 8 of the last 10 years, the award has always gone to a finalist from California. For this year's competition, suppose you had a choice between two finalists, one from California and the other from New York. If it came down to GPA, and the New York student's GPA was 3.8, what minimum GPA

must the California student have in order for you to feel comfortable awarding the scholarship to the California student?” Participants then provided a minimum GPA. The *control condition* was identical but omitted the information about the past winners from California.

## Results and discussion

As predicted, participants in the *people accounting condition* required higher minimum GPAs for California applicants ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = .13$ ) relative to the *control condition* ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .28$ ;  $F(1,46) = 5.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We also note that the *control condition* was not equivalent to the 3.8 GPA of the “New York” student, a small difference that is not too surprising considering that a “minimum” GPA could be offset by other factors. At any rate, these results suggest that individuals in *people accounting* mode will elevate standards for candidates from over-represented social categories relative to their normal baseline. The present analysis thus suggests that numerous social category dimensions, which are meaningful but not necessarily politically charged, have the potential to underscore the concern for fairness, trigger *people accounting*, and raise standards in the face of a numerical imbalance in representation.

## General discussion

While affirmation action may affect allocations on the basis of race and gender, the present analysis explores a far broader, recognizable phenomenon—*people accounting*. Studies 1–3 demonstrate how individuals to begin using headcounts along nominal social category lines to inform their allocation decisions. While an imbalance in representation is a necessary precondition for *people accounting*, it alone is not sufficient. As Study 4 suggests, *people accounting* will only occur along meaningful dimensions but not less meaningful ones. Moreover, Study 5 reveals that one important implication of *people accounting* is that standards shift in order to accommodate social category-based choice.

Despite these findings, one could question whether the present decision-making methodology was appropriate for testing the *people accounting* hypothesis. As Daniel Kahneman (2000) clarified, however: “The answer is that choice... is the fruit fly of decision theory. It is a very simple case, which contains many essential elements of much larger problems. As with the fruit fly, we... hope that the principles that govern the simple case will extend in recognizable form to complex situations (Kahneman, 2000, p. xi).” We feel this statement legitimately applies to the present analysis.

### Future directions

Research on shifting-standards (e.g., Biernat & Manis, 1994; Biernat & Vescio, 2002) has found that, when a measure of evaluation is subjective (e.g., Likert scales on seman-

tic dimensions), a member of a social category is judged with respect to other members of that social category. However, when a measure is objective (e.g., units such as inches or dollars), the member of the social category is then judged with respect to that real life, immutable scale. For example, a particular female might be judged as “tall” on a subjective Likert measure (relative to other females) but then judged to be significantly shorter on an objective measure of inches (relative to males). While subjective scales are thus more mutable than objective ones, Study 5 interestingly suggests that people will even elevate standards on an *objective* measure of GPA, as they did for the relatively over-represented “California” individuals to facilitate the selection of a member of another social category (“New York”). Of course, this finding is particularly striking because it runs counter to a key assertion of the shifting-standards model—objective measures “cannot be differentially adjusted depending on the category membership of those being evaluated” (Biernat, 2003; Biernat & Vescio, 2002, p. 67). Future research should thus carefully examine the tenets of the shifting-standards model in the context of *people accounting*.

Another interesting direction is to explore the role of naïve realism (Garcia, Darley, & Robinson, 2001; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995) and compare applicant-evaluator differences in the ability to anticipate *people accounting*. For instance, imagine that two of three finalists for a dissertation award last year were graduate students from Ohio State University (OSU). If present year selection committee members realize that OSU received the honor of having two finalists last year, they may become more likely to choose graduate student finalists who are not from OSU. Ironically, however, present year OSU applicants might actually perceive the previous year’s selection as a signal that OSU students are favored, when in fact *people accounting* would suggest otherwise. Applicants, especially ones vulnerable to self-serving biases (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Kunda, 1987), may thus misinterpret the preconditions for *people accounting* as evidence of ingroup favoritism.

A related direction is to explore how *people accounting* affects the decision to gather information. Perhaps individuals in *people accounting* modes may not examine the details about candidates from over-represented categories to the same degree as candidates from under-represented ones. Indeed, information processing models (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) suggest that search occurs first at the category level and then, if necessary, the attribute level. In the OSU example, not only are the chances lower for OSU applicants but their applications might only be skimmed, and this likelihood increases exponentially when the evaluators are cognitively busy (Gilbert, 1989) or simply have too many applications to review.

And then an antecedent question is one about the tipping point. When does a social category become over-represented? For instance, with Supreme Court Justice Alito on the bench, five of the nine justices are “Catholic.” Is there less likely to be a sixth “Catholic?” Perhaps during the next

nomination process, would-be “Catholic” nominees might be categorically denied serious consideration, regardless of the impeccability of their academic or judicial credentials. Of course, however, this tipping point undoubtedly varies from person to person. What is perceived as under-representation of one social category could be perceived as over-representation by another. Although many questions remain, we next extend our *people accounting* findings to the affirmative action debate (see Brewer, 1997).

### Implications for affirmative action

Perhaps the most striking implication of the present analysis is that affirmative action policies (Crosby et al., 2006) may have far deeper psychological roots. In the present analysis, people engage social category-based choice even when the social categories themselves (e.g., “Stanford,” “California,” and “PhD institution”) are not gender or racial ones. While attitudes toward affirmative action can be explained in terms of symbolic politics (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sears, Van Laar, Carrillo, & Kosterman, 1997), social dominance orientation (Federico & Sidanius, 2002), and a commitment to economic principles (Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, & Kendrick, 1991), *people accounting* explains that the propensity to correct inequalities along social category lines is not merely a legacy of President Johnson’s Executive Order 11,246 in 1965 but rather a basic tendency emerging from social categorization.

Even so, the present analysis should not imply that *people accounting* always results in the final selection of a potential affirmative action candidate. Such candidates might make it to a short list but not necessarily the final selection (Monin & Miller, 2001), as the process of short-listing often cleanses away feelings of prejudice and exonerates any compunction to make a final social category-based selection. However, *people accounting* could be a more powerful predictor of the final selection along nominal social category lines, which are probably less prone to such “moral licensing” effects.

We also note that social category-based choice is only likely to occur among uninvolved outside observers. Of course, *people accounting* becomes less likely when individuals highly identify with a focal social category in an allocation decision (Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979) and, in affirmative action, when any of the other factors above are at play (e.g., Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Although some have argued that gender and racial categories should be completely irrelevant to allocation decisions (e.g., Zuriff, 2004), the present analysis suggests such arguments must also address the widespread, far more common practice of allocating opportunities on the basis of prosaic social categories, not simply gender or racial ones.

### Conclusion

While affirmative action policies affect allocations on the basis of race or gender, the present analysis explores a far

broader phenomenon—*people accounting*. People accounting occurs when a numerical imbalance in representation along meaningful but benign social category lines begins to impact our choices, as we favor one individual over another on the basis of category membership to equalize any imbalance. Hence, regardless of one’s stance on the affirmative action debate, *people accounting* describes a far more common practice of social category-based choice.

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