

Informal 'quotas' are common, study shows

September 12 2006

Affirmative action is just one example of a much more pervasive and deeply rooted human tendency to even out the numbers of people from different social categories, according to University of Michigan researchers.

Keeping an informal tally of the groups to which people belong—Catholics on the Supreme Court, Californians on a political ticket, PhDs from a particular place with jobs in any given academic department—is a routine part of decision-making, especially in highly competitive situations.

That is the finding of U-M psychologists Stephen Garcia and Oscar Ybarra, whose article "People Accounting: Social Category-Based Choice," is forthcoming in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

In the article, Garcia and Ybarra, who are psychologists at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR), report on a series of experiments showing how this tendency, which they call "people accounting," works in everyday life.

In one of the experiments, for example, participants were told: "Imagine you are deciding to hire a new psychology professor in the area of inter-group relations. But first, here is some background about the current faculty."

All participants were told that the two top candidates for the job were

males with Anglo-sounding names (Adams and Smith) and that one candidate was from Rice University, the other from the University of California at Berkeley. But one group of participants was told that three of the five existing faculty earned their doctorates from Berkeley. The other group of participants received no detail on the doctoral-granting affiliations of existing faculty.

When participants knew the affiliation of existing faculty, they chose the candidate from Berkeley only 34 percent of the time. However, when they did not know the existing faculty's affiliations, the Berkeley candidate was chosen 55 percent of the time.

"Perhaps the most striking implication of the present analysis is that affirmative action policies may have far deeper psychological roots than is commonly believed," said Garcia, the lead author of the article and an assistant professor in the U-M Gerald Ford School of Public Policy.

While affirmative action applies to allocations on the basis of race and gender, Garcia and Ybarra show that numerical imbalance in many social categories, including some that may seem irrelevant to the decisions at hand, prompts head counts along social category lines that are designed to keep various groups in a rough balance.

"The propensity to correct inequalities along social category lines is not merely a legacy of President Johnson's Executive Order 11246 in 1965 but rather a far more basic tendency," Garcia said.

"When we are disinterested observers with an objective perspective and not subject to in-group biases, this deep-seated tendency to even out the count from different social categories kicks in," Ybarra said. "But when we identify with the categories under consideration, even those including gender, race or ethnicity, and we think that the decision will affect our group, our innate sense of fairness doesn't necessarily apply."

Source: University of Michigan

Citation: Informal 'quotas' are common, study shows (2006, September 12) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-09-quotas-common.html>

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