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The Merit Principle and Opposition to Affirmative Action: Making
Exceptions in Academia in the Presence of Discrimination

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THE MERIT PRINCIPLE AND OPPOSITION TO AFFIRMATIVE ACTION:

MAKING EXCEPTIONS IN ACADEMIA

IN THE PRESENCE OF DISCRIMINATION

BY

MARK ABRAMS

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of
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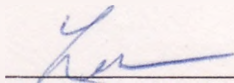
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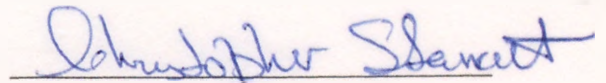
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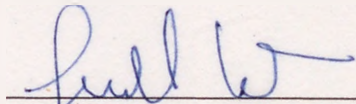
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Dedication

This Thesis is dedicated to my parents, William and Betty, sister Kristen, and brothers B.J. and Ashley for their continuous support in my academic endeavors.

Abstract

Affirmative action (AA) was developed in the 1960's with the goal of combating discrimination by considering underrepresented African Americans in education and employment. However, in more modern times, AA has been a topic of increasing debate amongst Caucasian Americans, specifically in academic admissions because of the belief that discrimination may no longer be an issue. Usually, individuals who strongly endorse the merit principle and believe that the most deserving individuals should be rewarded oppose AA programs that violate this principle. It was hypothesized that Caucasian Americans who strongly endorse the merit principle would make exceptions for an AA program in the face of discrimination. However, this hypothesis was not supported even when participants were experimentally induced to perceive high levels of discrimination. The implications of this research suggest that support for and compliance with AA may in fact be an issue of the past.

The Merit Principle and Opposition to Affirmative Action:

Making Exceptions in Academia

In the Presence of Discrimination

Since the early 1960's discrimination against African Americans in the United States has been a contributing factor to their underrepresentation in social institutions such as banks, universities, corporations and governments (federal, state, and local). As a result, Affirmative Action (AA) was instituted to deal proactively with issues of discrimination and underrepresentation. AA programs were implemented because of past and existing inequalities between African Americans and Caucasian Americans (Kluegel, 1985).

Specifically, AA refers to both voluntary and mandatory efforts undertaken by federal, state and local governments to combat discrimination and to promote equal opportunity in education and employment (APA, 1996). With the goal of combating discrimination by considering underrepresented African Americans in education and employment, AA as a general policy has not been so readily supported by Caucasian Americans (Kluegel & Smith, 1983). Many White Americans have come to believe that AA has led to preferential treatment involving "reverse discrimination," whereby less qualified members of underrepresented groups are chosen over more qualified Caucasian Americans (James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001).

For the last decade, White Americans have come to believe that the economic status of Black Americans has improved, suggesting even that the gap between Whites and Blacks has been reduced significantly with regard to education and employment (Kluegel, 1985). As a result, many Whites also believe that employment and educational

discrimination based on race is a feature of the past and that Blacks no longer face significant discrimination.

The purpose of this study was to examine the underlying reasons for the opposition of many White Americans to AA programs and evaluate whether, under specific circumstances, AA programs and policies would be accepted.

Beliefs of Individualism

Many writers have suggested that the cultural ideology of individualism that is embraced by many Caucasian Americans may provide the basis of the skeptical stance that many Caucasian Americans take toward AA (Kimmelmeier, 2003). Sampson (1988) postulated that individualists believe that each person is an entity separate from every other. Individualism helps maintain the core values and institutions that represent the U.S. society today. Specifically, the core cultural values of freedom, responsibility, and achievement are all assumed to be embodied by individualism. The central basis of support for individualism revolves around two major arguments: 1) freedom, autonomy, and independence are central cultural values that can be accomplished only by individual effort and would be undermined by any other alternative; and 2) achievement and success, whether personal or societal, depend on the qualities of character that emerge from individualism. Crosby (1994) suggested that using group membership rather than individual qualifications as criteria for such things as college admissions decisions is contrary to the individualist notion that individuals themselves control and are responsible for their failures and successes. It was suggested that considering an individual's group membership when making admission decisions is unjust because it

takes away the impact of universal decision criteria such as individual competence and performance (Winkelman & Crosby, 1994).

American Stratification System

American society has been for some time structured around a stratification system that divides people into socioeconomic layers or strata. Class is considered of major importance in an industrialized society. Classes are derived from inequalities in possessions and control of material resources as well as access to educational and occupational opportunities (Kerbo, 2002).

Kluegel and Smith (1983) suggest that AA programs constitute an intervention in the workings of the stratification status quo. The stratification system rests on the premise of individualism as well as self-discipline, which is the belief that individuals are responsible for their own successes and failures based on their hard work and diligence. Whites' evaluation of AA policies has been suggested to be influenced by beliefs about how the American stratification system should and does function. When African Americans benefit from AA, many Whites believe that African Americans are violating the stratification beliefs of individualism and self-discipline and are given preferential treatment without evidence of success through independence, diligence and hard work.

Legal Challenges to Injustice

Over the past 20 years, the perceived injustice over AA policies has manifested itself in many court cases, as White Americans used the legal system to challenge decisions made in the educational arena (e.g., Regents of the University of California V. Bakke 1978, Hopwood V. Texas 1996, and more recently, the cases involving the University of Michigan in Gratz V. Bollinger 2000 and Grutter V. Bollinger 2001;

Grutter v. Bollinger 2002). All of these cases involved accusations that AA policies in these institutions violated the 14th Amendment, which states that no state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges of citizens of the U.S.

In the educational arena, many Whites have felt that they have been overlooked for admission consideration because of the policies and procedures of AA. The procedure of AA in the educational institutions has been to look at the pool of potential students to discover availability and compute the proportion of minorities who are accepted and retained as students. When admissions show a discrepancy between the applicant pool and the student population in the proportion of minorities, the schools take action to increase minority admittance. As a result, many White Americans are rejected by admissions committees because of AA. Both the Bakke and Hopwood cases were brought before the U.S. Supreme Court, which found the University of California and the University of Texas policies to be unconstitutional. Many Whites argued that it was not fair to admit an African American student while rejecting a White student whose scores on specific standardized tests had proved to be higher (Crosby, 2004).

Both the Bakke and Hopwood rulings implied that if Black Americans were going to be accepted into programs of higher learning it must be based primarily on their diligence, motivation, and achievement and not their race (Crosby, 2004). According to Kluegel (1985), when surveyed, two-thirds of Whites agreed with the statement that, on average, Blacks achieve less than Whites in many areas because most Blacks do not have the motivation to pull themselves out of disadvantaged situations.

Morris and Leung (2000) postulated that cultural affiliations help shape what is considered fair and unfair and that the categorical or structure-oriented nature of AA is

likely to confuse or offend White Americans because of their stance on individualism. African American and White American cultures have different values in terms of group orientation. Kimmelmeier (2003) postulated that an individualist ideology of justice emphasizes that individuals, not groups, are afforded rights and privileges, and that groups are of secondary relevance for determining what is fair and just. As a result, many White Americans do not view inequality among groups as problematic as long as the rights of individuals are not violated. Thus, any decisions made in favor of groups are perceived as an unjust and contrary to the country's individualistic value system.

A study conducted by Kimmelmeier (2003) on Caucasian American undergraduate students focused on two qualitatively different aspects of the self-concept: the independent self (individualism) and the interdependent self (collectivism). The independent self refers to mental representations of characteristics that differentiate the self from other individuals and cause the individual to be unique and different. The interdependent self refers to representations of the self as belonging to a social group. The researchers assessed differences in the evaluation of AA in individual and collectivist cultures. Group participants were given vignettes that depicted an ethnic discrimination task in which the participants were to indicate on a 7-point scale how acceptable, appropriate, and fair they found particular companies' hiring practices to be. However, first they were primed using a linguistic perception task that was designed to manipulate the content of the self-concept. In the independent condition, 19 pronouns in the text were in first person singular (I and my), whereas in the interdependent-self condition pronouns, were changed to first person plural (we and our). The AA policy was rated less favorably in the independent-self condition than in the interdependent condition. The results

suggested that priming individualism by causing the independent self to become salient led to a more negative assessment of AA policies.

In a second experiment conducted by Kimmelmeier (2003), participants in the independent-self condition were asked to focus on their own independence and uniqueness by writing about personal experiences. Participants in the interdependent-self condition were asked to focus on their family because of the hypothesis that a strong commitment to and immersion in one's family is the most important element of the collectivist's beliefs. Also, instead of using a hypothetical construct as in the first experiment, participants were asked about their opinion of AA policies as they understood them. The results indicated that when the independent self was primed, participants expressed less favorable views of AA compared to when the interdependent self was primed. Furthermore, it was shown that AA attitudes were less favorable in the independent-self priming condition than in the collectivist-priming condition.

Principled Conservative Perspective

It has been argued that Whites' responses to AA result from dominance of individualistic over structuralistic explanations of how the stratification system functions (Federico & Sidanius, 2002). This means that programs leaning toward preferential treatment are opposed because they advocate structural change that is not believed to be needed (Klugel et al., 2002). Furthermore, Federico and Sidanius (2002) suggested that this principled conservative perspective must be understood in the sense that White opposition to race-target policies should be understood: mainly in terms of ideology, concerns about fairness, and individualistic values. Crosby et al. (1994) stated that many Whites believe that AA not only violates the equity rule of distributive fairness but also

embodies a system that goes against the hallmark of American society. As stated earlier, Whites argue that AA goes against the American societal principle of individual achievement and hard work. In benefiting from AA in admissions policies, Blacks often get preferential treatment based on their race rather than their skills. For many White Americans, AA desecrates the American dream, destroying the principle of individualism and self-discipline (Coleman, 2003).

Merit Principle

One interpretation of this ideology is that Whites may be more opposed to AA to the extent that these programs violate the merit principle. The merit principle is a distributive justice rule that suggests that individuals' relative outcomes (e.g., pay) should be allocated in proportion to their relative inputs (e.g., effort) (Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002).

Furthermore, Son Hing et al. suggested that people who view the world as a fair and equitable place would oppose policies that potentially violate the norms of meritocracy. Thus, impartial treatment of all people, without regard to their race or ethnicity, would be the best way to achieve diversity (Tomasson, Crosby, & Herzberger 1996).

African Americans' Views of AA Opposition

Whereas White Americans' opposition to AA has been attributed to the belief in individualism and meritocracy, African Americans have had an entirely different view about AA and the strong opposition against it. It has been suggested that many African Americans believe that resistance to AA, particularly in terms of Whites' responses to policies benefiting Blacks, may occur in part because of the motivation and ability to

maintain present social stratification and economic order that benefits Whites (Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994).

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Many theorists have argued that common stereotypes are a true cognitive element of prejudiced attitudes (Devine, 1989). Other theorists have suggested that stereotypes are useful in allowing rationalization for prejudiced feelings against a particular group.

Devine (1989) suggests that stereotypes are automatically attributed to members of the stereotyped group. Because racial attitudes and stereotypes are part of the social legacy of society, no group can change the unavoidable stereotypes attributed to ethnic groups (Ehrlich, 1973 as cited in Devine, 1989).

However, although individuals may have knowledge of a stereotype, their beliefs may not coincide with the stereotype (Devine, 1989). It has been suggested that because of common socialized experiences, high- and low-prejudiced individuals are equally knowledgeable of the cultural stereotype of African Americans. Furthermore, because the stereotype has been frequently activated in the past, it is a well-learned set of associations that is automatically activated in the presence of a member of the specific target group. These unintentionally activated stereotypes have been suggested to be equally present and unavoidable for high- and low-prejudiced persons. However, it has been suggested that high- and low-prejudiced persons differ with respect to their personal beliefs about African Americans. Whereas high-prejudiced persons are likely to have personal beliefs that coincide with the cultural stereotype, low-prejudiced persons make the decision that the stereotype is an inaccurate basis for evaluation and experience a conflict between the automatically activated stereotype and their personal beliefs. Thus, Devine (1989)

suggested that low-prejudiced persons must create a cognitive structure that reflects their current beliefs. Because the stereotype has a longer history of activation than the newly acquired personal beliefs, overt non-prejudiced responses would require controlled inhibition of the automatically activated stereotype and activation of the newer personal belief structure.

Devine (1989) tested the implications of the disassociation of automatic and controlled processes in prejudice. Participants were given a questionnaire to determine their knowledge of a cultural stereotype of African Americans. The participants were informed that the experimenter was only interested in the knowledge of the content of cultural stereotypes about African Americans and not their personal beliefs. Participants were given a page with blank lines and were instructed to list the elements of the stereotype. Participants then completed a 7-item Modern Racism Scale. The Modern Racism scale was developed to evaluate anti-Black attitudes in a subtle way that can measure participants' racist beliefs without their being able to detect it. There was no significant difference between the high- and low-prejudiced participants' knowledge of the cultural stereotype.

Study 2 examined the hypothesis that the activation of the racial stereotype that African Americans are hostile would cause participants to judge ambiguously aggressive behaviors as being more aggressive when performed by an African American than a White American. Participants were given the Modern Racism Scale. Afterward the participants were primed with stereotyping words presented rapidly in the participant's visual field. This method is referred to as attentionless processing. It involves processing stimuli that, although detectable, cannot be recalled or recognized by the participant. This

strategy was used to prevent the participants from knowingly recognizing the content of the primes. During this task, either 20% or 80% of the words presented were related to a racial stereotype. When participants' ability to deliberately monitor stereotype activation was excluded, both high- and low-prejudice participants produce stereotype compatible and prejudice-like responses. Thus, individuals both high and low in prejudice appear to have cognitive structures that support prejudice responses.

Study 3 examined the high-and low-prejudice participants' responses to a task developed to concentrate on a person's personal beliefs about African Americans. Both high- and low-prejudice White Americans listed their thoughts about African Americans. It was expected that because high-prejudice White Americans' beliefs overlap with the cultural stereotype of African Americans, they would express stereotype-compatible thoughts, whereas low-prejudice White Americans would replace the stereotypes with thoughts consistent with their non-prejudiced personal beliefs. Participants were instructed to list as many alternate labels of African Americans as a social group as they were aware of. Afterwards, participants completed the Modern Racism Scale. Low-prejudice participants censored and inhibited the automatically activated negative stereotype-congruent information and consciously replaced these thoughts with thoughts that expressed their non-prejudiced values. Low-prejudice participants wrote fewer negative thoughts. Their thoughts were found to reflect the importance of equality or the repudiation of the cultural stereotype. Low-prejudice White Americans were found to be more reluctant to attribute traits to a group as a whole. However, high-prejudice White American participants were much more consistent with their cultural stereotype of

African Americans. Their thoughts were more negative, and they were more likely to attribute stereotyped negative traits to the group as a whole.

Aversive Racism

Murrell et al. (1994) suggest that when certain levels of prejudice are experienced against African Americans, especially as it pertains to AA, it may be explained by aversive racism. Subtle biases result from the integration of an egalitarian value system with prejudice and racist feelings. The aversive racist perspective assumes that cognitive (e.g., personal group interest) and socio-cultural processes (e.g., historical racist traditions) have led most White Americans to develop negative feelings toward African Americans. Because of the traditional cultural values, however, many Whites also have sincere convictions concerning fairness, justice, and racial equality. The existence of both unavoidable racial biases and the wish to appear egalitarian forms the foundation of ambivalence that the aversive racists feel. Thus, aversive racists support egalitarian principles and believe themselves to be non-prejudiced but unconsciously hold negative attitudes and feelings about Blacks (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). The aversive racist perspective predicts that when the policies are presented as benefiting African Americans compared to other targeted groups (elderly and handicap individuals) the more negative response to policies focusing on micro-level implementation, compared to those providing macro-level justifications, would be more negative. Micro-justice includes perceptions of justice and fairness that are relevant to a specific individual (specific AA policy or candidate), whereas macro-justice refers to perceptions of fairness that consider the broader social, historical, legal and moral contexts. Murrell et al. (1994) theorized that resistance to AA programs benefiting African Americans in particular would be most

prominent when the programs were presented with macro-level justifications rather than micro-level justifications. Participants' reactions to AA policies involved three groups that the participants were not members of: African Americans, older adults, and physically handicapped individuals.

Participants were questioned about their perceptions of fairness and support for four common ways of presenting AA policies. Two of the policies focused on micro-level actions that ranged in the degree to which the program emphasized non-merit factors to address disparities (preferential treatment and reverse discrimination). The other two policies provided macro-level justifications in terms of achieving diversity or remedying past historical injustices.

Murrell et al. found that among the policies that were most strongly associated with negative attitudes toward AA, the presence of African Americans as the target group produced the greatest level of resistance compared to older and handicapped individuals. Although the type of policy was important in predicting attitudes towards AA, attitudes were more negative when the policy was targeted for African Americans than for other groups, especially when the policy could be perceived as violating principles of fairness without justification.

Symbolic Racism

Similar to aversive racism, another form of racism has evolved from the civil rights era of the 1960's. This form of racism manifests itself as a more subtle form of racism. The term symbolic racism suggests that Whites target Blacks as an abstract collective group rather than as individuals. It has been suggested that the origins of symbolic racism occur in many Whites before adulthood and gradually evolve into

symbolic racism. It manifests itself as a blend of strong traditional American values with moderate levels of racial anxiety and antagonism that, as a result, develop into a combination of moral traditionalism and racism (Sears & Henry, 2003). The group's affects and cultural values are suggested to be developed in the preadult years. These early-learned racial fears and stereotypes are developed because of socialization experiences. These experiences then form into a psychological substrate that later predisposes the individual to embrace biased political belief systems. These belief systems are universally expressed in the individual's environment and are cognitively consistent with the racially focused substrate.

Sears and Henry (2003) suggested that symbolic racism comes from combination of anti-Black affect and traditional values, the most notable being individualism. Anti-Black affect may or may not manifest itself in feelings of dislike or hostility but rather be experienced subjectively as a fear, avoidance, anger, distaste, disgust, contempt, apprehension, unease, or simple dislike and a desire for distance.

The second construct in the theory of symbolic racism is Whites' conservative values of individualism, hard work and self-reliance and a delay of gratification, as opposed to the belief in Blacks' laziness, seeking favoritism and handouts, as well as their impulsivity (Sears & Henry, 2003). Sears and Henry examined three empirical implications of the blend between conservative values and anti-Black affect. The hypothesis was that traditional racial prejudice as well as political conservatism would be found to be combined with some form of symbolic racism. The results indicated that conservatism and racial prejudice are separate constructs, but symbolic racism is

embodied about equally in both. Thus, symbolic racism was the factor that connected political conservatism to racial prejudice among Whites in America.

A second study was conducted to see if conservative values were more strongly grounded in individualism. It was hypothesized that if symbolic racism was grounded in anti-Black affect and individualism, it may be a function of those constructs measured separately, or may have its beginnings in a blend of these separate parts. It was hypothesized that this union might reflect the cognitive connection between them, such as the belief that African Americans violate individualism. This individual construct was described as Black individualism. The results of the study were as follows: 1) general individualism and anti-Black affect did correlate, but Black individualism represented a unique psychological construct; 2) these elements significantly affected symbolic racism; 3) Black individualism had significant effects on racial policy preferences and contributed unique variance to them, whereas anti-Black affect and general individualism measured separately did neither; and 4) symbolic racism largely mediated the effects of Black individualism on racial policy preferences. Thus, the combination of anti-Black affect and individualism did play a role in symbolic racism.

Sears and Henry's (2003) third study explored the assumption that classical liberalism or race neutral individualism drives Whites' opposition to racial policy preferences. It was suggested that if classical liberalism was responsible for an overall opposition to all governmental intervention, it should not matter for which group the intervention was intended. Thus, race-oriented and gender-oriented individualism should have equivalent effects on gender preferences and race policy preferences.

It was hypothesized that race-related predispositions should be more influential than race-targeted policy preferences, that gender-related dispositions should be more influential than gender-targeted policy preferences, and that the group-neutral individualism should have less effect in both cases. The results of Study 3 indicated that Black individualism had a strong influence over racial policy preferences, whereas gender individualism did not. Sears and Henry suggest that the interpretation of White opposition to racial policies as primarily being attributed to non-racial individualism or classical liberalism had no empirical support. This was found because it was the specific component of Black individualism that derives its power over racial policy preferences, and the specifically gendered element of gender individualism that linked it to gender policy preferences.

Group Dominance Perspective

Another explanation for Whites' opposition to race-targeted policies is the group dominance perspective.

The general group dominance perspective suggests that racism is rooted in a basic desire for group dominance that expresses itself in a variety of ways, including group self-interests and general preference for hierarchical relations among social groups (Federico et al., 2002). Specifically, Sidanius, Prato, and Rabinowitz (1994) defined social dominance as an individual difference variable expressing very generalized, group-relevant anti-egalitarianism and the desire to establish hierarchical, dominant relationships among social groups. Conversely, Federico et al. argued that the dominance perspective suggests that racism and opposition to AA may serve a similar purpose: the reinforcement of group-based hierarchies. Jost and Thompson (2000) suggested that most

social orders are distinguished by the manner and extent of differentiation between groups and by the forms of inequality that prevail. Thus, insofar as social institutions are maintained in part through attitudes and beliefs that support them, conscious and unconscious ideological thought processes play a significant role in the acceptance or rejection of particular modes of inequality.

James et al. (2001) found, when using both experimental and survey research methods, that AA programs targeted to benefit African Americans are associated with negative job-related attitudes among Whites. More importantly, in a field study, James et al. (2001) found that White employees' satisfaction with promotion opportunities decreased as perceptions of an African American-targeted AA policies increased. Thus, it has been suggested that organizations that are perceived as pursuing policies to ensure recruitment, selection, and advancement of African Americans do so at a price (James et al., 2001). This indicates that Whites who react to these policies negatively may see the organization as providing insufficient promotion opportunities (James et al., 2001).

Meritocracy and AA

Of the numerous explanations mentioned above for Caucasian Americans' opposition to AA, Son Hing et al. (2002) postulated that Caucasian Americans who strongly endorse the merit principle may not always oppose merit-violating AA programs. This is assumed because meritocracy is a principle or ideal that prescribes that only the most deserving individuals are rewarded. However, Son Hing et al. predicted that meritocracy can only operate accurately in an unbiased system. In two studies Son Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna (2002) tested the relations of people's preference for the merit principle, their perceptions of workplace discrimination and their opposition to a

preferential treatment program. It was hypothesized that among individuals who perceived low levels of work-place discrimination, stronger preference for the merit principle would predict greater opposition to a preferential treatment program.

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that among participants with a strong preference for the merit principle, greater perceptions of workplace discrimination would cause individuals high in merit to show lessened opposition. There was a main effect of preference for the merit principle, such that greater endorsement of the merit principle was related to greater opposition to the preferential treatment program. There was a main effect for perceptions of discrimination, such that greater perceptions of discrimination were related to less opposition to the preferential treatment program. Also, individuals who perceived little work-place discrimination showed merit-based opposition to the preferential treatment program.

According to Crosby (2004), social psychologists have consistently shown that human beings strongly believe that the world is a just world in which people are rewarded and punished according to their deeds. Thus, many subscribe to the belief that the world is structured as one where fair and honest procedures dominate and where self-serving corruption does not exist.

Thus, Son Hing et al. (2002) found that individuals with strong support for the merit principle were less opposed to preferential treatment programs if they perceived high levels of discrimination in the work place. Similarly, those who endorse meritocracy and see the world as fair and equal would oppose policies that violate norms of meritocracy. Conversely, Son Hing et al. postulated that when discrimination is present

as a factor in hiring, those who strongly endorse meritocracy should be most offended by discrimination.

Measuring Merit Through Standardized Tests

Many have argued that one of the most efficient ways to measure the true merit of individuals is through standardized testing such as the SAT, GRE, LSAT, and GMAT (Crosby et al. 1994). However, Jensen (as cited in Crosby) suggested that reliance on these standardized, so-called objective tests, rather than subjective impressions, does not guarantee that fairness will be achieved.

Detterman (2000) suggested that a problem arises when the standardized racial (ethnic or gender) gap in job (or school) performance is smaller than the standardized gap in test performance. This dilemma is referred to as selective system bias. For example, on the SAT I exams, African American students (as well as Latino students) usually score significantly worse than do White students, but typically achieve college grades that are only slightly lower than Whites, and they usually graduate from college at only slightly lower rates than Whites.

A problem develops when there is admission of a minority applicant into programs that reject a White applicant who has higher test scores. The assumption can be made that the test scores are an unassailable indicator of true merit. However, Williams (2000) found that standardized tests such as the SAT, GRE, GMAT and LSAT are best at predicting first-year grades in college or graduate school, but are weaker as predictors of later achievement.

AA in college admissions has been and continues to be a widely debated topic. Amirkahn et al. (1995) suggest that history of discrimination should become part of

admission folders because it is still present in society. It has been suggested that minorities should be represented in academia to the same extent that they are represented in the general population, and if they are not, there are inequalities that need correction.

The underlying factors that contribute to the discrepancy between Caucasian Americans' and African Americans' acceptance into undergraduate and graduate admissions has been standardized tests. The average discrepancy between test scores of the two groups is 180 points. Proponents of AA have argued that just looking at standardized test scores without taking race into consideration will cause re-segregation of higher education if race is eliminated as an admissions factor. It has been argued that in order to improve the test scores among African Americans, these very tests must become culturally sensitive and efficient in broad domains, taking into consideration the uniqueness of culture.

Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether people who strongly endorse meritocracy would make an exception for an AA program under conditions of discrimination (high vs. low) within the educational arena (i.e., admissions process). Specifically, the study tested whether merit-based opposition to an AA program would be mitigated when participants were experimentally induced to perceive high levels of discrimination in the admissions process. This study attempted to test the relationships of people's preference for the merit principle, their perceptions of discrimination (high vs. low) in the educational arena, and their opposition to an AA program. It was hypothesized that among participants who perceive low levels of discrimination in the admissions process, those who have a strong preference for the merit principle would have greater opposition to an AA program. In addition it was hypothesized that greater perceptions of discrimination in admissions would result in lessened opposition to an AA program.

Method

Participants

Participants were 200 (199 undergraduate, 1 graduate) Caucasian American students (115 men, 85 women) at Michigan State University who ranged from 18 to 30 years of age. They completed survey materials in four separate undergraduate classes. (See Appendix A for cover letter).

Materials

PMP Scale. This is a 15-item 7-point Likert scale that measures an individual's endorsement of the merit principle. Respondents rated each item on a 7-point scale (1= *strongly disagree* to 7= *strongly agree*) (See Appendix B).

Perceptions of Bias in Merit Assessment Scale (PBMA). The PBMA is an 8-item 5-point Likert-scale that measures participants' perceptions of general discrimination in the treatment of target group members. This was a modified version of Son Hing et al.'s (2002) Perceptions of Workplace Discrimination Scale to apply to the college admissions process. Two forms were developed intended to influence self-inferences concerning perceptions of admissions discrimination. The two forms of the scale differed based on the frequency with which the discrimination manipulation is stated. For example, in the low discrimination condition, the questions were designed to be difficult to agree with (e.g., "discrimination always occurs"). In the high discrimination condition questions were designed to be easy to agree with (e.g. "At times discrimination occurs") (See Appendix C).

Northern Indiana University Survey. This is a fictionalized description of an AA program that "Northern Indiana University" is considering adopting. The program describes an AA program already implemented at another university ("Southern

Minnesota University”). The description stated that the most qualified applicant above a particular level would be admitted to the university unless there were any African Americans above the minimum qualification level, in which case they would receive admittance over a more qualified non-target group member.

Two items in the Northern Indiana survey were used to measure participants’ construal of the program as a means of overcoming discrimination: “Under Southern Minnesota University’s program, what is the likelihood that all students will be evaluated by the same standards when considering admittance?” and “Under Southern Minnesota University’s program, what is the likelihood that a less qualified target-group member (an African American) would be admitted before a more qualified white male.” In the Northern Indiana survey, opposition to affirmative action was evaluated by the following items: 1.) “What is your opinion of Northern Indiana’s initiative to implement an affirmative action program?” and 2) “How likely is it that you would recommend to Northern Indiana University’s affirmative action committee that they implement Southern Minnesota’s affirmative action program?” (1 = *extremely unlikely* to 7 = *extremely likely*). One item in the survey measured construal of the affirmative action program as redefining merit: “Southern Minnesota’s program would facilitate the admittance of minorities whose qualifications (given current assessment procedures) underestimate their actual abilities.”

Participants’ perception of the program as necessary was measured by the item: “Southern Minnesota’s program is necessary to eliminate any current discrimination that exists against women and visible minorities at Northern Indiana University.”

Participants’ feelings of White guilt were measured by the following item: “I feel guilty

about any current discrimination that exists against African Americans.” Finally, participant’s feelings of the program as a short-term solution was measured by the item: “Southern Minnesota’s program is a short-term solution that will ensure equal representation of all groups in education in the future.” All of the construal items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The items within the survey were separated by a few filler questions about the program (See Appendix D).

Procedure

Participants were first given the 15-item PMP scale. Then participants were randomly assigned to complete one of two versions of the PBMA (PBMA-H or PBMA-L). After completing the PBMA scale, participants were given the 15-item Northern Indiana University Survey with the AA proposal. Participants were then asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix E).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Two groups were created by subjecting the PMP scores to a median split. The highest 40% were to be identified as having high preference for the merit principle and the lowest 40% as having low preference for the merit principle. In total 160 of the 200 participants met the criteria of being either high or low on PMP scores. To investigate the success of this split, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed comparing the groups. The analysis revealed a significant effect of PMP group $F(1, 158) = 2.09, p < .001$. As expected participants in the high PMP group ($M = 76.33, SD = 3.59$) scored significantly higher than participants in the low PMP group ($M = 63.60, SD = 4.17$).

A manipulation check was conducted to determine whether participants responded to the discrimination items in the predicted manner. It was predicted that participants in the high-discrimination (PBMA-H) condition would endorse the discrimination items more, compared with those in the low-discrimination condition (PBMA-L). As expected, there was a significant effect of experimental condition on participants' responses, $F(1, 156) = 2.19, p < .001$, such that participants in the high-discrimination condition endorsed the discrimination items more ($M = 26.51, SD = 7.20$) compared with participants in the low-discrimination condition ($M = 22.52, SD = 7.20$). A *t*-test was conducted comparing the high and low discrimination conditions on PMP score. As predicted, the high PBMA group ($M = 70.07, SD = 8.08$) did not differ from the PBMA low group ($M = 68.89, SD = 6.78$). In the AA survey, the two opposition items were significantly correlated, $r = .59, p < .001$. A composite score was used in subsequent analyses.

Main Study Analyses

To investigate opposition to the preferential treatment program, a 2(PMP High vs. Low) x 2 (PBMA High vs. Low) ANOVA was conducted. As expected, the main effects were not significant. Preference for the merit principle did not predict opposition to the program, $F(1, 156) = 1.47, p = .22$, nor did discrimination condition $F(1, 156) = .71, p = .40$. The PMP X PBMA interaction was not significant $F(1, 156) = 4.43, p = .03$ as originally predicted. (Table 1 shows the mean distribution of participant's reactions to the experimental manipulation under both high and low PMP scores).

Table 1

*Means of Participants' Reactions to Experimental
Condition*

Dependent Variable	Low		High	
	Discrimination		Discrimination	
	PMP Low	PMP High	PMP Low	PMP High
Opposition Composite	4.21	3.50	3.57	3.77
Overcoming Discrim.	4.01	3.89	3.82	4.15
Program Necessity	4.12	3.10	3.27	3.34
Redefining Merit	4.45	3.85	4.25	4.23
Short-term Solution	4.17	4.13	3.77	3.49
White Guilt	4.66	4.46	4.16	4.00

To investigate the ratings of the AA program as a means of overcoming discrimination a second 2(PMP High vs. Low) X 2(PBMA High vs. Low) ANOVA was

conducted. The main effect for PMP group was not significant $F(1, 156) = .69, p = .40$. The main effect for PBMA group was not significant $F(1, 156) = .09, p = .76$. The PMP X PBMA interaction was not significant $F(1, 156) = 2.97, p = .08$. Individuals who strongly endorsed meritocracy and who were induced to perceive more admissions discrimination were no more likely to perceive the AA program as a strategy to overcome discrimination than were participants who were induced to perceive little discrimination.

A third 2(PMP High vs. Low) X (PBMA High vs. Low) ANOVA was computed. The results of the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for PMP group $F(1, 165) = 4.04, p = .04$. Individuals in the low PMP group ($M = 3.68, SD = 1.50$) found the program as more necessary to eliminate discrimination than participants in the high PMP group ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.51$). The main effect for PBMA group was not significant $F(1, 155) = 1.66, p = .19$. The PMP X PBMA interaction was not significant, $F(1, 155) = 5.33, p < .05$.

A fourth 2(PMP High vs. Low) X (PBMA High vs. Low) was conducted. However, no PMP X PBMA interaction emerged for participant's perceptions of the program as a means of redefining merit $F(1, 156) = 2.36, p = .23$.

A fifth 2(PMP High vs. Low) X (PBMA High vs. Low) was conducted. However, no PMP X PBMA interaction emerged for participant's perceptions of the program as a short-term solution for unequal representation $F(1, 156) = .29, p = .59$. A sixth 2(PMP High vs. Low) X (PBMA High vs. Low) was conducted. However, no PMP X PBMA interaction emerged for participant's feelings of white guilt $F(1, 156) = .00, p = .94$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to extend the work of Son Hing et al., (2002) to a new setting, academia. Merit-based opposition to a preferential treatment program was expected, as in Son Hing et al., to be mitigated when participants were induced to perceive high levels of discrimination in academia against African Americans. This was based on the assumption that discrimination embodies unmerited outcomes and, therefore, individuals who strongly endorse meritocracy would be offended by it, thus taking steps to reduce it by approving an AA program (Bobocel, 2002 as cited in Son Hing et al.).

The results of the manipulation check indicated that there was success in replicating Son Hing et al.'s experimental manipulation of participants' perceptions of discrimination scale (Son Hing et al.'s scale of referenced workplace discrimination). The current scale altered items to apply to academia, with the same results: Just as in Son Hing et al.'s study, it was found that participants responded to the discrimination manipulation in the predicted manner. Participants in the high-discrimination condition endorsed the discrimination items more than did participants in the low-discrimination condition. However, using an experimental manipulation of perceptions of merit bias did not yield any significant results for support of any AA program regardless of the level of discrimination or high or low preference for merit. Specifically, among those experimentally induced to perceive little discrimination in an academic setting, participants who strongly endorsed meritocracy were no more opposed to a preferential treatment program, compared with those who weakly endorsed meritocracy. It was hypothesized that there would be an interaction such that among participants who

strongly endorse meritocracy, those induced to perceive more admissions discrimination would perceive the AA program as a likely strategy to overcome discrimination compared to participants who were induced to perceive little admissions discrimination.

Second, it was hypothesized that an interaction would occur such that among participants who strongly endorse meritocracy, those induced to perceive low admissions discrimination would not perceive the AA program as necessary to eliminate discrimination.

Third, it was hypothesized that an interaction would occur such that participants who had a strong preference for the merit principle and were induced to perceive high admissions discrimination would view the AA program as a means of redefining merit.

Fourth, it was hypothesized that an interaction would be present such that participants who had a strong preference for the merit principle and were induced to perceive high admissions discrimination would view the AA program as a short-term solution for unequal representation.

Finally, it was hypothesized that an interaction would be present such that participants who had a strong preference for the merit principle and were induced to perceive high admissions discrimination would report more feelings of White guilt. The results of the study indicated no evidence to support the hypothesis that people with a strong preference for the merit principle alter their construal of a preferential treatment programs under conditions of high discrimination in academia such that they are no more likely to perceive the program as (a) a strategy to overcome discrimination (b) as necessary to eliminate discrimination (c) a means of redefining merit, or (d) a short-term solution for unequal representation than individuals who weakly endorse the merit

principle. Furthermore, participants who had a strong preference for the merit principle as well as those with a weak preference did not experience White guilt regardless of discrimination condition.

Limitations of the Current Research

Though the findings of the current research indicate that many individuals do not support an AA program in an academic setting in the presence of high or low discrimination no matter the preference for the merit principle, one conclusion may be suggested. The design specific to this study was not completely consistent with the design used by Son Hing et al. Specifically, the dependent variables in this study were covariates in Son Hing et al.'s study.

Conclusion

Over the past five years, AA has been a topic of heated debate in academia as well as in the workplace in Michigan. This resulted in litigation that had to be decided by members of the U.S. Supreme court. Legislators in states such as California (Proposition 209), Washington (I 200), and Florida ("One Florida" initiative) have all instituted legislation to abolish AA in their respective states. In Michigan on November 7, 2006, a majority of electors adopted Proposal 6-02, which is a constitutional amendment that bans public institutions from using AA programs that give preferential treatment to groups or individuals based on their race, gender, color, ethnicity or national origin for public employment, education or contracting purposes. Public institutions affected by the proposal include state government, local governments, public colleges and universities, community colleges and school districts. The measure passed with a vote count of 2,131,966 (58%) to 1,546,291 (42%). Conversely, it may be that the results of this study

further support the opinions and climate of AA in not only the state of Michigan, but possibly a growing trend across the United States.

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Appendix A

Cover Letter

Dear Research Participant:

Your participation in a research project is requested. The title of the study is: The Merit Principle and Opposition to Affirmative Action: Making Exceptions in Academia in the Presence of Discrimination. The research is being conducted by Mark Abrams, a student in the psychology department at Barry University, and is seeking information that will be useful in the field of psychology. The aims of the research are to discover your opinions about discrimination and affirmative action. We anticipate the number of participants to be 200. If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to do the following: complete five survey forms that will take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. Your consent to be a research participant is strictly voluntary and should you decline to participate or should you choose to drop out at any time during the study, there will be no adverse effects or consequences. This study is anonymous and completely voluntary. There are no risks to you. Although there are no direct benefits to you, your participation in this study may help our understanding of discrimination and affirmative action.

As a research participant, information you provide will be kept anonymous, that is, no names or other identifiers will be collected on any of the instruments used. After the data is collected the information will be discarded. By completing and returning this survey you have shown your agreement to participate in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study of your participation in the study, you can contact me, Mark Abrams, at (786)-512-9438, my supervisor, Dr. Szuchman, at 305-899-3278, or the Institutional Review Board point of contact, Ms. Nildy Polanco, at (305)-899-3020.

Thank you for your participation,

Sincerely,

Mark Abrams

Appendix B

Preference for the Merit Principle Scale

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number on the scale below.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Moderately Disagree	3 Slightly Disagree	4 Neither Disagree Nor Agree	5 Slightly Agree	6 Moderately Agree	7 Strongly Agree
1.	In work organizations, each employee ought to be named employee of the month at least once, even if he or she is not deserving.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2.	In organizations, people who do their job well ought to rise to the top.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3.	It is wrong for an employer to give a job to someone they know without advertising the job to other candidates.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	In life, people ought to get what they deserve.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5.	The effort a worker puts into a job ought to be reflected in the size of a raise he or she receives.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.	When students are working on a group project, each member of the group ought to receive the same grade regardless of the amount of effort each team member puts in.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	Promotion decisions ought to take into account the effort workers put into their job.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8.	Members of a work team ought to receive different pay depending on the amount each person contributed.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9.	Sometimes it is appropriate to give a raise to the worker who most needs it, even if he or she is not the most hard working.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10.	Qualifications ought to be given more weight than seniority when making promotion decisions.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Disagree Nor Agree	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree

11. Between two equally smart students applying for the same job, the one who is the harder worker ought to always get the job.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

12. When a bonus is given to a work team for good performance, the money ought to always be divided equally among the group members.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

13. It is never appropriate to choose which student to hire by how much the student needs the job.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

14. People ought to be able to get away with poor quality work under some circumstances.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

15. If every person in an office has the same abilities, the promotion ought to always be given to the person who puts in the most effort.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Appendix C

Perceptions of Bias in Merit Assessment Scale *L

Universities are paying an increasing amount of attention to the issue of how merit is assessed in University Admissions. One issue under discussion is whether criteria such as an individual's skills, abilities, and knowledge are accurately assessed in both selection and performance evaluation of applicants. We are interested in the extent to which individuals believe that biases against minorities currently exist (a) in the criteria chosen for admission and (b) in the measurement of those criteria in Universities. Please note: We are referring to both intentional and unintentional biases that currently exist *in general* as it relates to University admissions.

Please circle the number from 1 to 5 indicating the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Neither Disagree Nor Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree

1. African Americans are always disadvantaged by biases in the admissions criteria used for admissions because selection tools fail to take into account less traditional skills and abilities such as "cultural intelligence" and interpersonal skills that promote diversity and educational experiences for all students.

1	2	3	4	5
2. Admissions criteria never recognizes the full potential of visible minority candidates (i.e. African Americans) because cultural diversity, language skills, and different perspectives are not appropriately valued by Universities.				

1	2	3	4	5
3. Subtle personal biases during admissions interviews (e.g., beliefs that African Americans are intellectually inferior) always disadvantage African American applicants in the assessment of their qualifications.				

4. Visible minorities (i.e. African Americans) are always unfairly disadvantaged during the selection interview because white interviewers often, consciously and/or unconsciously, exhibit in-group favoritism in the assessment of candidates' qualifications.

1	2	3	4	5
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5. Barriers against visible minorities (i.e. African Americans) exist in all tests used for personnel selection (e.g., intelligence tests) because the tests are almost always inherently biased in favor of groups who are familiar with North American cultural norms.

1	2	3	4	5
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6. As a result of in-group favoritism, white interviewers, always, whether consciously and/or unconsciously, use different criteria for different groups during the selection process.

1	2	3	4	5
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7. Regardless of personal intentions, personal prejudices against visible minority applicants (i.e. African Americans) always influences perceptions of their performance, unfairly disadvantaging them.

1	2	3	4	5
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8. Overall, in both selection and performance evaluation, there are almost always biases against minorities (i.e. African Americans) in the assessment of their skills, abilities, and knowledge.

1

2

3

4

5

7. Regardless of personal intentions, personal prejudices against visible minority applicants (i.e. African Americans) may at times influence perceptions of their performance, unfairly disadvantaging them.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Overall, in both selection and performance evaluation, there may be inadvertently biases against minorities (i.e. African Americans) in the assessment of their skills, abilities, and knowledge.

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix D

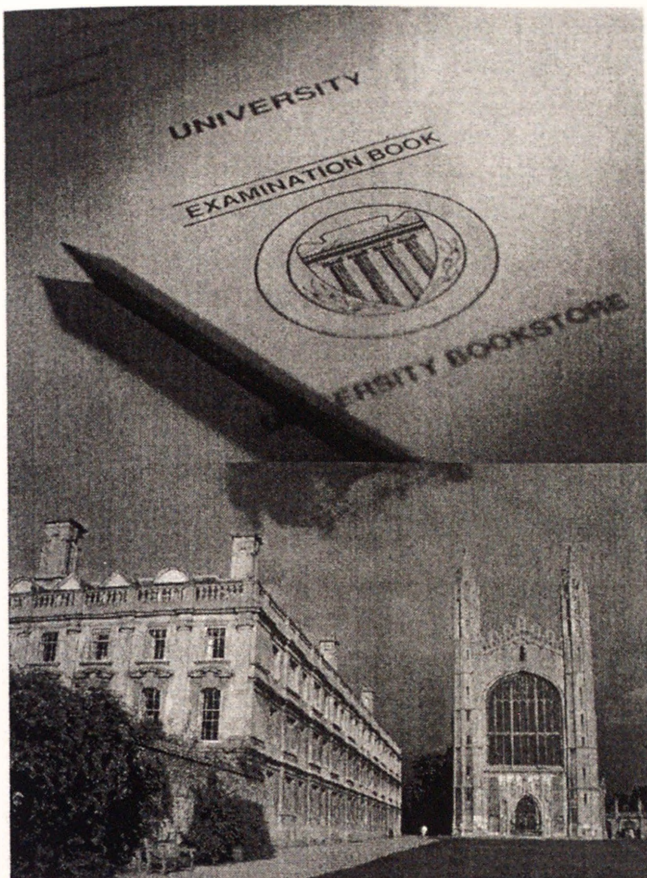
Northern Indiana University

Decisions Ahead of Us

In the current dynamic academic environment Universities can no longer afford to have selection and admissions policies that discriminate against African Americans. Although we at Northern Indiana University feel that our admissions policies have been fair in the past, we realize that we must work hard to remove any admissions barriers that may affect these groups. Toward this end, an affirmative action committee has been established. This committee has received support from faculty at Northern Indiana University, including future beneficiaries of an affirmative action program. Graduate Student Dejuan Baker states, "Northern Indiana University is dedicated to creating a program that assists target-group members like me."

Northern Indiana's affirmative action committee has investigated a number of affirmative action programs implemented by other Universities. This report focuses on one affirmative action option, which has been implemented at Southern Minnesota University.

Although this program does not encompass all possible affirmative action solutions, based on the success of Southern Minnesota University, it definitely appears to be a program Northern Indiana University should consider.



Please circle the number that indicates how you feel about each of the following items.

1. What is your opinion of Northern Indiana University's initiative to implement an affirmative action program?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 extremely neutral extremely
 unfavorable favorable

2. How necessary do you think it is for Northern Indiana University to implement an affirmative action program?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 extremely neutral extremely
 unnecessary necessary

3. How adequate is the explanation provided by Northern Indiana University for implementing an affirmative action program?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 extremely neutral extremely
 inadequate adequate

4. What is your opinion of Northern Indiana University conducting an affirmative action attitude survey?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 extremely neutral extremely
 unfavorable favorable

Northern Indiana University

Please circle the number that indicates how you feel about each of the following items.

9. Southern Minnesota's program would be effective at removing any discrimination that exists against minorities at Northern Indiana University.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly neutral strongly
disagree agree

10. Southern Minnesota's program would facilitate the admittance of minorities whose qualifications (given current assessment procedures) underestimate their actual abilities.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly neutral strongly
disagree agree

11. Southern Minnesota's program is a *short-term* solution that will ensure equal representation of all groups in education in the future.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly neutral strongly
disagree agree

12. Although Southern Minnesota's program may be unfair to some individuals, it is more fair to more individuals because it will help create a more just society overall.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
strongly neutral strongly
disagree agree

13. Which of the following is a greater injustice?

- a) Affirmative action programs like Southern Minnesota University, which may prevent the most qualified individual (if it is a white male) from being admitted.

OR

- b) Discrimination in admissions, which may prevent the most qualified individual (if it is a minority) from being admitted.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
A is much more A and B are B is much more
unjust than B equally unjust unjust than A

14. What is your opinion of Southern Minnesota University's affirmative action program?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
extremely neutral extremely
unfavorable favorable

15. How likely is it that you would recommend to Northern Indiana University's affirmative action committee that Northern Indiana University implement Southern Minnesota University's program?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
extremely neutral extremely
unlikely likely

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Please fill out the following as it best describes you:

AGE: 18-21 22-25 26-29 30+

Gender Male Female

Classification: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior
 Grad

Race/Ethnicity:

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian or Pacific Islander

Black

White

Hispanic

Other