

## Casualty and Social Category Bias

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This research explored cases where people are drawn to make judgments between individuals based on questionable criteria, in particular those individuals' social group memberships. We suggest that individuals engage in *casualty* to mask biased decision making, by recruiting more acceptable criteria to justify such decisions. We present 6 studies that demonstrate how *casualty* licenses people to judge on the basis of social category information but appear unbiased—to both others and themselves—while doing so. In 2 domains (employment and college admissions decisions), with 2 social categories (gender and race), and with 2 motivations (favoring an in-group or out-group), the present studies explored how participants justify decisions biased by social category information by arbitrarily inflating the relative value of their preferred candidates' qualifications over those of competitors.

A male bank president is faced with hiring a new vice president in this traditionally male-dominated profession. Two finalists emerge: a woman with a great deal of experience but mediocre recommendations and a man with little experience but strong recommendations. The choice is a difficult one, as both dimensions are clearly relevant and important, and each candidate is stronger on one dimension. The decision is made more difficult by the fact that the candidates differ in gender, because either choice may invite suspicion of bias. If the president selects the male candidate, he may be accused of sexism, but if he chooses the female candidate he may be suspected of bowing to norms of political correctness. Thus the bank president can be accused of bias regardless of which candidate he selects.

We suggest that a common strategy used to avoid the appearance of bias when making such decisions is to cloak decision making in more acceptable terms. The president might select the male candidate, for example, but claim that his decision was motivated by the candidate's superior qualifications by stressing his belief that recommendations are more important than experi-

ence. On the other hand, our bank president may feel that it is appropriate to give the edge to the woman to make up for traditional underrepresentation. Despite this very different motivation, our president might still be motivated to hide the true reasons for his preference, because an admission that the decision was motivated by gender might cause others to criticize him for paying lip service to political correctness, or may undermine the woman's credibility in the eyes of other employees. This president, then, might select the woman but claim that the decision was based on his strong belief that experience is the more important qualification.

By recruiting attributes that support a preferred decision through reshaping the importance of qualifications—or, more generally, by reshaping attributes of the social world—individuals are able to mask potentially biased decision making. In the present research we explored this general phenomenon in more depth: By engaging in *casualty*—specious reasoning in the service of justifying questionable behavior—when confronted with difficult choices, people are better able to make these difficult decisions. In general use, *casualty* has the connotation of public pronouncements intended to mislead others. This first sense of *casualty* is intended to bolster one's public image, but the second purpose of *casualty*—individuals' private rationalization of their questionable behavior—is equally important. Our bank president may be faced with both external (e.g., laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender, or political correctness norms) and internal pressures (e.g., his egalitarian beliefs or internalized norms of political correctness) to make the correct choice. *Casualty* may serve both to justify questionable decisions to others and to rationalize such decisions to oneself, allowing one to maintain what Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987) called a desired "illusion of objectivity".

Our present focus is on decision making in social domains, where categories such as sex or race are morally charged and raise questions of prejudice and bias, which likely increases individuals'

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motivation to mask questionable behavior.<sup>1</sup> Social scientists have long been interested in exploring cases where the human desire to appear moral fails to result in moral behavior, of course. Psychologists frequently focus on situations in which people attempt to justify or rationalize questionable or immoral behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Tsang, 2002), and the many ways in which questionable decisions, policies, or actions are justified and legitimized are well documented (e.g., Kelman, 2001; Scott & Lyman, 1968), as with those who engage in self-interested behavior with costs to others (e.g., Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Monin & Norton, 2003). Batson and his colleagues' research on moral hypocrisy is particularly interesting and relevant: In these paradigms, participants engage in a coin flip, ostensibly to make a fair choice about whether they or another participant will receive a more attractive experimental task. A coin flip is generally used as a public sign of fairness—but participants in these studies flip the coin in private, and after rigging the flip in their favor continue to see themselves as unbiased. Below, we explore in more detail private mechanisms for maintaining a view of the self as unbiased—a goal as fundamental as ensuring that others do the same.

### Dissonance and Motivated Reasoning in Social Decision Making

The fact that people are motivated perceivers of the social world is axiomatic in psychology. A large body of research, dating back at least as far as S. Freud's (1894/1962) elaboration of defense mechanisms (see also A. Freud, 1936), suggests that people's perceptions of the world—and of themselves—are often shaded toward maintaining positive views of the self. Within social psychology, Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that the need for consistency causes individuals to rationalize their inconsistent behavior; indeed, several theories of dissonance suggest it is precisely the need to maintain a positive view of the self that leads to efforts to reduce dissonance (e.g., Aronson, 1968; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; C. M. Steele, 1988). Decisions can be particularly problematic in the social realm, as poor decisions can both threaten this positive view of the self and threaten one's image in the eyes of others. Individuals facing decisions between two attractive alternatives—as in our opening example of the bank president—may experience what Festinger (1964) termed *anticipated dissonance*: situations in which individuals are aware that any decision will lead to inevitable postdecisional regret. Although social category information (e.g., race or gender) provides a clear differentiating factor that should simplify such decision making (Tversky, 1972), individuals in these situations are often proscribed from using such information and must search for different justification. Indeed, people frequently search for reasons to rationalize their decisions only after making those decisions (Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1993), often inflating the value of their choices as one strategy (Brehm, 1956; Mather, Shafir, & Johnson, 2000). This process is particularly interesting in the situations under investigation in the present studies because the actual reason for participants' choices—social category information—is not available for purposes of justification, leaving participants to scramble for other compensatory cognitions. In this view, casuistry occurs because of this scramble: Forced to make a decision between members of different social groups, participants quickly search for other cognitions consonant with their eventual choice and, having found them, reify them to the status of dominant

criteria to rationalize their decisions—a process that can occur before or after the decision is made.

The demonstration of the need for cognitive consistency led to a larger effort to demonstrate and define mechanisms by which individuals' motives influence their perceptions of both themselves and the social worlds. Research on *motivated reasoning* (e.g., Kunda, 1990; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987) has primarily explored two sometimes-competing motives in human reasoning, both of which affect thought and behavior: (a) the motivation to be accurate (e.g., Kruglanski, 1989b; Pelham, 1991; Pelham & Neter, 1995) and (b) an equally compelling motivation to see things in a preferred manner (see Kruglanski, 1989a, for an overview). Research exploring this second motivation has generally focused on two human predilections: (a) the tendency to interpret information in ways that confirm preexisting beliefs and attitudes about the self (e.g., Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992) and others (e.g., Darley & Gross, 1983; Schaller, 1992) and (b) the robust tendency to view the self positively—often more positively than is warranted (e.g., Brown & Rogers, 1991; Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Goethals, 1986; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). This tendency to view the self positively can be supported by the tendency to interpret the world in preferred ways, as individuals specifically interpret information from the social world in ways that serve their need for high self-regard. We suggest that this kind of reasoning is common when individuals face problematic decisions.

In the present studies, we explored reasoning in decisions that force a person to choose between individuals with different social category memberships. In particular, decisions that require people to choose across social categories, such as race or gender, make two motivations salient: On the one hand, people generally try hard to be objective, impartial, and unbiased; on the other hand, people can be motivated to arrive at a desired outcome, such as when self-interest leads people to see in-group members as more attractive choices or when egalitarian motives lead people to favor members of stigmatized or underrepresented groups. Either of the last two motivations conflict with the motive to be unbiased, which would require turning a blind eye to social category information. We suggest that it is these conflicting motivations that lead to reasoning strategies that attempt to justify decisions in more socially acceptable terms, thus honoring the need to maintain a view of the self as objective by restructuring the social world in ways that make the self seem unbiased. In addition, and implicit in the above discussion, although most of the dissonance and motivated reasoning involves judgments about the self, the common situations explored in the present investigation demonstrate how processes of motivated reasoning and dissonance reduction are brought to bear on reasoning about other individuals. Although the broad motive is the same, to arrive at desired conclusions and to

<sup>1</sup> It is not the case, of course, that all use of social category information is proscribed. Members of stigmatized groups may feel more licensed to use social category information in decision making: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for example, is licensed to use racial information in selecting its leaders. Social category use is normally proscribed, however, for members of traditionally nonstigmatized groups, such as, in the United States, Whites, and particularly White men, the two groups we target in this investigation.

maintain an illusion of objectivity, in these situations individuals reshape not aspects of themselves but rather their weighting of the importance of aspects of others.

### Social Categories in Decision Making

Social categories such as race and gender are highly salient, and although individuals may be reluctant to use this information, countless investigations have shown that social categories do factor heavily in social judgment. They can have an automatic influence on our judgments and decisions (e.g., Allport, 1954; Devine, 1989; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), and recent research suggests that race and gender are automatically attended to and encoded almost instantly (Ito & Urland, 2003), suggesting that their influence on decision making may be hard to avoid. At the same time, research has shown that people feel at least somewhat constrained from judging others on the basis of their social group memberships, particularly in the absence of other information (Yzerbyt, Schadronek, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994). However, although people feel that having only social category information does not permit judgment of targets, they will ironically rely on social category information when given extra information (e.g., Darley & Gross, 1983), even if they merely believe they have been given such information (Yzerbyt et al., 1994).

Despite this widely documented influence of social category information on judgment, this information is among the most forbidden in both discourse and decision making in contemporary America. Use of these categories has been officially proscribed in a variety of contexts, and statements to this effect can be found, for example, in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the mission statements of most corporations and universities. Although language that suggests freedom from bias does not always reflect an actual lack of bias, people are at least often motivated to appear unbiased. White Americans, for example, can be motivated to appear nonprejudiced toward Blacks (e.g., Plant & Devine, 1998) and even to avoid acknowledging the possibility that they may have negative attitudes toward Blacks (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Because norms in favor of appearing nonprejudiced are strong (at least in the United States), people's desire to appear nonprejudiced frequently leads to actions to ensure that others will view them accordingly. In a clever study, Dutton (1971) showed that inappropriately dressed couples who attempted to dine at restaurants requiring formal dress were twice as likely to be seated if they were Black rather than White, presumably because the proprietors felt that confronting Black patrons might make them appear prejudiced. In addition to this desire to appear unbiased to others, people are also motivated to view themselves as unbiased. When people realize they have acted in a biased manner, they often attempt to correct for that bias (Wegener & Petty, 1995; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000); liberal Whites who learn that decisions they have made may unfairly target Blacks, for example, are likely to attempt to revise those decisions (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). In sum, then, both internal and external pressures combine to make use of social category information taboo in decision making.

### The Licensing of Bias

Whereas there is a vast literature on the impact of stereotypes on judgment, comparatively little research has explicitly examined

how social categories influence choice behavior, when individuals discriminate—in both senses of the word—between members of different social groups (Fiske, 1998, but see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000, and Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2002, for notable exceptions). This is a potentially important distinction, because choices are more often public, and decision makers are accountable for their public preferences in ways that they may not be for their private impressions. In particular, nonsocial information that differentiates between individuals may be required to justify public choices. In Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, and Mentzer's (1979) study, for example, participants were given a choice of watching a movie with either a handicapped person or a nonhandicapped person. These participants, presumably motivated to sit with the nonhandicapped person, only did so when the two targets were watching different movies; when the two targets were watching the same movie, however, and thus did not have differentiating information, participants were forced to sit with the handicapped person. This kind of *attributional ambiguity* (Snyder et al., 1979) or *elasticity* (Hsee, 1996) allows individuals to discriminate under the guise of more acceptable criteria (e.g., movie preferences).

In the present studies, we were specifically interested in how elasticity might allow people to justify decisions involving social categories such as race or gender. It is important to note that many real-world situations are elastic: Candidates for any position invariably have multiple dimensions on which to be evaluated. In the studies reported below we used this natural elasticity to demonstrate casuistry in decision making. Allport (1954) was among the first to describe how individuals motivated by social category bias marshal evidence to rationalize their prejudiced conclusions, by engaging in selective perception of the social world. Hodson et al. (2002) provided empirical evidence of this kind of strategy for masking social category bias; in their study, participants choosing between Black and White candidates for admission to college rated both highly qualified and highly unqualified White and Black applicants similarly. However, when qualifications were mixed (candidates were good on one dimension and poor on another), social category information influenced judgment, such that prejudiced participants rated White candidates higher, whereas nonprejudiced participants rated Black candidates more favorably. Most interesting is that participants inflated the value of whichever qualification their preferred candidate dominated the other candidate on (e.g., if they favored a Black candidate who had a higher grade-point average [GPA] than a White candidate, they subsequently claimed that GPA was the more important qualification). In the studies below, we used a paradigm similar to that developed by Hodson et al., with several key differences. First, our paradigm forces participants to make judgments between candidates by selecting between members of different social categories, whereas Hodson et al. did not require such explicit choice. Our forced-choice paradigm has implications for the nature of the expression of bias; whereas Hodson et al. argued that only mixed qualifications license biased judgment, we suggest that the forced-choice nature of our paradigm, which requires choice in the way many real-world situations do, allows for any elasticity—even between two highly qualified or two unqualified candidates—to license choice. Our desire to map these processes onto real-world situations underlies the importance of this kind of reweighting of criteria to buttress questionable decisions, a process that may account for a great deal of biased decision making in the real world. As such, the present investigation builds on Hodson et al.'s

research by exploring the processes underlying the phenomenon (including the time course and the public and private components of the bias) as well as exploring means of correcting the bias (e.g., forcing participants to equate the candidates and using real-world manipulations such as precommitment and accountability).

### Overview of the Experiments

We first explore casuistry in the domain of gender bias, presenting two studies in which male participants engage in casuistry when motivated to hire a male candidate. In Study 1, we demonstrated the basic effect, showing that male participants who select men for management positions justify that selection by inflating the importance of whichever qualification favors a male candidate, while failing to mention gender as a factor; in Study 2, we eliminated gender bias by forcing participants themselves to remove the elasticity in the situation. We next show that the effect is not used merely to justify in-group preferences, in a series of studies in which predominantly White college students motivated to favor Black candidates over equally qualified White candidates also engage in casuistry to justify their decisions. In Study 3, we demonstrated casuistry in the domain of college admissions and find that the reshaping of qualifications also leads to distortions in recall. Study 4 establishes that the phenomenon is not merely a public strategy, as participants inflated the value of qualifications favoring a preferred candidate on merely being exposed to candidates' resumes. Studies 5 and 6 demonstrate the robustness of the phenomenon, as making participants accountable for their decisions not only fails to attenuate use of social category information but actually increases casuistry, and precommitment to qualifications also fails to decrease the bias.

### Casuistry in Employment Decisions

In the first two studies, we wanted to establish the phenomenon of casuistry, demonstrating that individuals making decisions based on social category information would mask the true reasons for their choices. Gender discrimination in employment is both widely studied and widely documented. Women who enter traditionally male contexts may be seen as less competent than similarly qualified men (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974), and in hiring contexts in particular the "think manager—think male" phenomenon is paramount: Both men and women see the characteristics needed for success in management as stereotypically male (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schein, 1973, 1975). In the following studies, therefore, we used a simulated employment context in which male participants chose between male and female candidates for a stereotypically male job, a situation that stacks the deck in favor of discrimination against women. In the first study, participants selected managers for a construction company and then explained their decisions in an open-ended format. In the second study, participants equated the qualifications of two candidates and then chose between these candidates. In Study 1, we expected participants to select male managers regardless of qualifications yet justify that selection in terms of those qualifications, increasing the importance of whichever qualification favored the male candidate. In Study 2, we expected the self-equating of the candidates to force participants to forgo gender and instead rely on qualifications, but we expected these participants to be less satisfied with their choices as a result.

### Study 1: Gender Bias in Construction Hiring

Male participants read a scenario in which they were asked to play the role of a manager of a construction company whose task was to recruit a high-level employee (adapted from Monin & Miller, 2001). We expected our male participants to be motivated to favor male candidates for this stereotypically male position and then to justify their decisions by inflating the relative value of the male candidate's qualifications. We chose education and amount of relevant experience as the two qualifications to be manipulated. Because we used undergraduates in this investigation (who have little work experience), we expected them to favor more educated candidates in the absence of other information. The condition of particular interest in the present study is that in which the candidate with the preferred qualification also holds the undesired social category membership: the educated woman. We expected our male participants to forgo the importance of education in this incongruent condition and continue to select male candidates, by claiming that experience was the more important qualification.

### Method

**Participants.** Ninety-three male undergraduates completed the study in groups of up to 20 as part of a larger packet of questionnaires and were paid \$8.

**Procedure.** Participants took part in an employee selection procedure in which they, as heads of a construction company, had to select a candidate for a stereotypically male job. We stated that the job required both experience in the industry and a strong engineering background, thus making our two key dimensions—experience and education—salient. After reading this short paragraph, participants were instructed to rank five candidates in order of their preference. Two of the candidates were clearly better than the other three (and indeed, the vast majority of participants ranked them first and second). One candidate had more experience in the industry (9 vs. 5 years), and the other had more education (an engineering degree and certification from the "American Concrete Masonry Association" vs. an engineering degree only). We included other filler information for the candidates (age and reason for seeking job), which were designed to be similar. In the control condition, only first initials and last names were provided, so that no gender information was available. In the two experimental conditions, the first names of the candidates were provided, such that the two superior candidates were of different genders: In the *male-educated* condition, the male candidate had more education but less experience than the female candidate, and in the *female-educated* condition, the female candidate had more education but less experience than the male candidate.

After ranking their candidates, participants were asked an open-ended question that explored how they would justify their decisions with little prompting: "In the space below, briefly describe why you chose the applicant you did. What was most important in determining your decision?" We expected that participants in the control and male-educated conditions would report that education was more important but that participants in the female-educated condition would reverse this preference and report that experience was more important. We also expected few participants to claim that gender influenced their decision.

### Results and Discussion

One naive coder coded the open-ended responses for use of gender pronouns and use of gender as justification. The same coder and one of the authors coded which of the key qualifications—experience or education—was listed as more important. Many participants simply listed qualifications in order of importance; for

those participants who wrote at greater length, the coders made a subjective assessment of which qualification the participant felt was more important. We used this dichotomous variable to explore whether participants inflated the value of the qualification that favored their chosen candidate. Agreement was high for these ratings ( $r = .88, p < .001$ ), and discrepancies were resolved by using the naive coder's ratings.

Participants in the control condition tended to view the candidates as male, even in the absence of any gender information, as 34% (10/29) spontaneously used male pronouns, whereas only 3% (1/29) used female pronouns.

**Selection.** As expected, our college population showed a strong overall preference for education, picking the educated candidate over the experienced candidate 66% (61/93) of the time,  $\chi^2(1, N = 93) = 9.04, p < .005$ . This preference, however, was moderated by our manipulations. In the control condition, as predicted, there was a strong preference for the educated (and presumed male by our participants) candidate (76%), and we observed this same strong preference when the male candidate was more educated (75%). When the female candidate was more educated, however, only 43% of participants picked the educated candidate (see Table 1). The overall chi-square was significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 93) = 9.18, p < .02$ , as was a planned contrast on proportions comparing the female-educated condition with the other conditions ( $Z = 6.04, p < .001$  [Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985], residual  $Z = 0.27, ns$ ). Thus, although education was seen as more important in this decision, participants still selected the male candidate the majority of the time even when he was less educated.

**Justification.** Crucial to our hypotheses, however, is that participants justify their selection of candidates by stating that the qualification that favored their preferred candidate was more important. As we would expect from our results above, the control and male-educated conditions looked very similar, as 48% and 50%, respectively, listed education as more important than experience. In contrast, a strong preference emerged for experience as the most important qualification in the female-educated condition, as only 22% of participants ranked education as more important, thus justifying participants' selection of the more experienced male (see Table 1). The overall chi-square was marginally significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 88) = 5.65, p = .059$ , and the same contrast on proportions pitting the female-educated condition versus the other conditions was again significant ( $Z = 2.63, p < .01$ , residual  $Z = 0.46, ns$ ).

Equally important is that very few participants cited gender as playing a role in their decision, in any of the conditions: control = 0%, male educated = 8% (3/36), female educated = 14% (4/29). Overall, then, participants rarely made mention of gender in explaining their choice of candidate, although results clearly indicate that gender affected candidate selection.

Table 1  
Percentages of Participants Who Selected the Educated Candidates and Ranked Education as More Important, Study 1

Candidate	Selected educated candidate	Ranked education higher
Control (no gender)	76 (22/29)	48 (13/27)
Male, educated	75 (27/36)	50 (17/34)
Female, educated	43 (12/28)	22 (6/27)

## Study 2: Attenuating Casuistry

Study 1 showed that male participants favored male candidates by altering the relative importance of qualifications. In Study 2, we hoped to show that by removing elasticity from the situation we could circumvent gender-based selection, forcing men to rely on qualifications. We accomplished this goal by providing incomplete resumes and forcing participants to equate the two candidates themselves, then asking them to choose between the two candidates. Because Study 1 showed that undergraduates were more likely to select more educated candidates over more experienced candidates, we expected participants overall to favor the more educated candidate when forced to choose, in line with Slovic (1975), who showed that, after equating options, participants make selections on the basis of the more important dimension. Although male participants in Study 1 abandoned this preference for education when a female candidate was more educated, we expected the equating task to rule out this option. We expected male participants' dissatisfaction with their inability to favor men to be reflected in their desire to review more resumes for the same position; we predicted that male participants who were able to select men would show less desire to review more resumes (perhaps because future candidates might be more qualified women), whereas male participants who were forced into picking women (in the female-educated condition) would show a greater desire to review more resumes (perhaps in the hope that a more qualified man might come along).

### Method

**Participants.** Participants were male undergraduates approached by either a male or female experimenter (unaware of our hypotheses) in campus dining halls; a total of 46 agreed to take part in the study.

**Procedure.** We again used the construction scenario and presented participants with abbreviated resumes for two candidates (to simplify the task for participants, we removed the three filler candidates used in Study 1). The first candidate's resume was complete (36 years of age, BS in engineering, 9 years of relevant experience), whereas the second candidate's resume included age (36) and education (BS in Engineering and certification as a concrete technician) but lacked information regarding years of relevant experience. Participants were instructed to fill in the number of years of experience that would make the two candidates equally qualified. As in Study 1, there were three conditions: (a) one in which no gender information was provided; (b) one in which the first, less educated candidate was male; and (c) one in which this candidate was female.

After participants completed this task, they turned to the next page, on which they were asked to imagine that they had to choose between the two candidates, given the qualifications on the previous page (including the number of years of experience participants had filled in), and indicate which of the candidates they felt would be best qualified. After making their selection, participants were asked how likely they would be to review more resumes before making this selection, on a 7-point scale (range: 1 = not at all likely to 7 = very likely).

### Results and Discussion

Participants in all three conditions felt that the second candidate needed roughly 6 years of experience to make the two candidates equal ( $M = 6.20, SD = 2.01$ ), and this effect did not vary by condition ( $F < 1$ ). Thus, across all conditions participants were selecting between similar pairs of candidates. We might have expected these results to vary across condition, for the male participants to see women as requiring more experience than male

candidates to make up the difference; at least in this phase, however, our male participants rated the two similarly.

Participants in the control condition, as in Study 1, did show a preference for the educated candidate, as 56% (9/16) picked the more educated candidate. In the two gender conditions an even stronger consensus emerged. Participants overwhelmingly selected the more educated candidate, regardless of whether that candidate was male (94%, 15/16) or female (79%, 11/14). Thus we observed only a preference for education over experience,  $\chi^2(2, N = 46) = 6.25, p < .05$ ; as predicted, the contrast on proportions we used in Study 1 comparing the female-educated condition to the others did not approach significance ( $Z = .31, p = .37$ ). In contrast to Study 1, participants were unable to favor members of a desired social group.<sup>2</sup>

As we expected, men were not equally satisfied with the selection process across conditions. In general, participants wanted to see more resumes (overall  $M = 5.83, SD = 1.32$ , well above the scale midpoint of 4),  $t(45) = 9.37, p < .001$ , which is not surprising given the difficulty of choosing between two evenly matched candidates. However, participants in the female-educated condition expressed a stronger desire to seek more resumes ( $M = 6.29, SD = 0.83$ ) than did the more satisfied participants in the male-educated condition ( $M = 5.25, SD = 1.77$ ), and the no-gender participants fell in the middle ( $M = 6.00, SD = 0.97$ ),  $F(2, 45) = 2.69, p = .08$ . This difference approached significance between the two gender conditions,  $t(28) = 1.96, p = .06$ , although neither gender condition differed significantly from the control ( $ps > .15$ ).

### Summary of the Employment Studies

These two studies both demonstrated casuistry and attenuated bias when elasticity was removed from the situation. From a psychological standpoint, removing the effect with the manipulation in Study 2 is important; from a practical standpoint, however, this manipulation fails to map onto real-world situations—candidates usually do not ask prospective employers to complete their resumes for them. One of the goals of the experiments described in the next section was to explore whether more real-world strategies will also deny participants the opportunity to make biased choices. In Studies 1 and 2, the pressure for participants to mask their bias was quite clear, as the male participants understood (and, we hope, all men understand) that selecting other men without regard to qualifications is both sexist and illegal. It is possible that these male participants who sought to favor other men consciously inflated the value of the qualification that favored those candidates; it is also possible, however, that the desire to favor one gender causes participants to come to believe privately that those qualifications that favored men truly were more important. Another goal of the experiments described in the next section was to explore the more private aspects of casuistry by exploring whether casuistry results in memory bias and whether inflation of preferred candidates' qualifications can occur prior to a decision. We also sought to demonstrate that casuistry is used as a general strategy to justify decisions in the social realm, not only for decisions that favor in-groups (as in Studies 1 and 2). We thus chose to show that White undergraduates, pressured by desires to be egalitarian, norms of political correctness, or both, would favor Black candidates for admission to college. More important, we wanted to show that these participants would continue to engage in casuistry de-

spite this very different motivation, by inflating qualifications that favored Black candidates to mask the impact of social categories on their decisions.

### Casuistry in College Admissions

In Studies 3 through 6, we tested the idea that participants would overwhelmingly select a Black candidate over a White student for admission to college, regardless of qualifications, and then justify that choice by claiming their candidate was more qualified. Study 3 documents distortions in memory that accompany the biased inflation of qualifications favoring preferred candidates. In Study 4, we showed that inflation of qualifications can occur before a selection is made, on simply being exposed to candidates' qualifications, addressing the possibility that casuistry occurs only as postdecisional justification. Finally, we explored the real-world robustness of casuistry, showing that making participants accountable for their decisions not only fails to attenuate bias but actually increases the tendency to reshape qualifications (Study 5) and that precommitment to qualifications also fails to decrease the bias (Study 6).

### Affirmative Action and College Admissions

Some research has supported the view that White Americans are opposed to affirmative action programs, including programs that affect college admissions (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993), due in part to the obvious fact that some Whites are prejudiced (e.g., James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001) but also due to Whites perceiving affirmative action as violating the American creed of merit-based achievement (e.g., Kravitz, 1995). When affirmative action is framed as addressing injustice or inequity, however, Whites tend to be more supportive (Peterson, 1994; Swim & Miller, 1999). This support is probably multiply determined, by factors such as a desire for equality (Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002); White guilt (S. Steele, 1990); and, perhaps most important, a fear of being labeled racist. In one recent investigation, racists were rated similarly to terrorists and wife beaters (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002), and Whites are extremely hesitant to label their own prejudiced attitudes as reflective of racism (Sommers & Norton, 2004). Indeed, the large body of literature on aversive racism (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998) suggests that prejudice is often expressed in disguised or rationalized ways because of this fear of being so labeled. The present research suggests that this fear can lead Whites to overcorrect, favoring members of minority groups as a result of the dilemma with which they are faced.

The paradox of affirmative action for White Americans is that selecting Black candidates on the basis of race can imply that these candidates require preference to achieve equality, violating important American values and raising the specter of past racism. Both

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that removing filler information from the resumes in Study 2 made the task too obvious, such that it was not the removal of elasticity that decreased bias but a heightened awareness of the nature of the task. Although our results for selection cannot rule out this possibility, our results suggesting that participants' desire to view more resumes was highest in the female-educated condition suggest that it was the removal of elasticity in this key condition, rather than an overall tendency for participants to guess the nature of the task, that accounts for attenuation of the selection bias.

Whites who genuinely support affirmative action and Whites who support affirmative action in name only, then, can be constrained from publicly acknowledging that race played a role in any decision, or at least that race was the primary basis for judgment, even when that decision favors a historically disadvantaged group. Norton (2002), for example, found that 80% of White participants were willing to state which of two White candidates would be more successful in college solely on the basis of their photographs; when the two photographs depicted candidates of different races, however, only 50% were willing to make the same judgment. In addition, the recent trend in judicial decisions has been to limit or curtail the use of race as a criterion in decision making, making even choices motivated purely by egalitarian motives suspect (e.g., *Hopwood v. Texas*, 1996). In sum, Whites are under a variety of pressures to espouse affirmative action yet simultaneously are very reluctant to use a social category to justify decisions based on race. Thus, we predicted that being faced with these problematic choices would cause participants to favor Black candidates while masking the true reason for that preference.

### Study 3: Casuistry and Memory Distortion

We created a hypothetical college admissions selection task in which participants were asked to review resumes of high school seniors and select students they thought were most deserving of admission. We predicted that participants would be drawn to select Black candidates over White candidates, regardless of the specific qualifications of their resumes. After making their selections, participants were asked to rank qualifications in order of importance for determining admission to college. We expected participants to justify their decisions by claiming that qualifications that favored preferred candidates were more important.

In Study 3 we also begin to explore the private component of casuistry by examining whether participants altered the numerical value, and not just the relative ranking, of a preferred candidate's qualifications. We predicted that participants selecting a Black candidate with higher GPA would not only see GPA as more important in making admissions decisions but also would actually inflate their preferred candidate's advantage on that key dimension (with parallel results for number of high school Advanced Placement [AP] classes). After participants made their selections and justifications, therefore, we asked them to recall details of the candidate's applications.

### Method

**Participants.** Two hundred nine Princeton University students completed the study in groups of up to 20 as part of a larger packet of unrelated questionnaires and were paid \$8. Fifty-seven percent of the participants were female, and 5% did not specify gender. Because of experimenter error, we did not assess ethnicity in this study.

**Pretest.** To select criteria that would be roughly equal in importance, we asked 31 undergraduates to rate a number of qualifications for how important they were to being admitted to college on a 7-point scale (range: 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very*). GPA and difficulty of high school classes emerged as the highest ranked qualification ( $M_s = 6.19$  and  $5.81$ , respectively) and, most important for the present investigation, were seen as equally important. We therefore chose to use GPA and difficulty of high school classes, operationalized as number of AP classes taken, as our primary qualifications.

**Procedure.** Participants were instructed to imagine that they were on the admissions board at Princeton. To make political correctness norms

salient, all participants read a paragraph stating that "Some admissions procedures are alleged to be biased, and activist groups are pressuring colleges all over the country to review and reevaluate their admissions criteria." They received resumes from two male high school seniors and were instructed to review the resumes and indicate which of the two candidates they would choose to admit. Each resume included information about GPA, SAT scores, number of AP classes, letters of recommendation and essays received, and various extracurricular activities. The resumes were designed such that the two candidates were as equally qualified as possible, with equal cumulative SAT scores and the same number of extracurricular activities and academic awards. The only substantive difference was that one candidate had a superior GPA (4.0 vs. 3.85), whereas the other candidate had taken more AP classes (9 vs. 6). We counterbalanced whether the candidate with the higher GPA appeared first or second. In addition, half of the participants were given information about the race of the candidates—one Black, one White—in the form of attached photographs of two college-aged males (see Hodson et al., 2002, for a similar paradigm), and half were not given any information about the race of the candidates.

After selecting candidates, participants ranked eight qualifications (letters of recommendation, GPA, student government, number of AP classes, SAT Verbal, SAT Math, athletic participation, and essays) in order of importance for admission to college. We created a dichotomous variable assessing whether GPA or AP classes had been ranked higher. Participants next completed unrelated questionnaires for approximately 15 min, were confronted with a surprise recall task—the original candidates' resumes, but with all qualifications omitted—and were instructed to fill in as much of the original information as possible.

### Results

**Selection.** First, we observed a main effect of qualifications, as more participants selected the candidate with more AP classes (60%, 126/209) than the candidate with the higher GPA,  $\chi^2(1, N = 209) = 8.85, p < .005$ . Participants in the two control (no social category) conditions showed an equal aversion to the candidate with a higher GPA, picking him only 23% of the time when they saw this candidate first and 37% of the time when they saw him second,  $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 2.25, ns$ . When faced with a White candidate with a higher GPA, participants again showed a preference for AP classes, selecting this candidate only 26% of the time; when the Black candidate had the higher GPA, however, preferences drastically reversed, and the overwhelming majority chose this candidate (75%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 24.77, p < .001$  (see Table 2).<sup>3</sup>

**Justification.** Although there was a clear preference for selecting candidates with more AP classes, we observed a main effect of qualifications such that participants were more likely to rank GPA higher than number of AP classes (63%, 131/209),  $\chi^2(1, N = 209) = 13.44, p < .001$ . This effect, however, was driven entirely by one cell. Participants in the two control conditions ranked GPA first roughly half the time (57% and 56%,  $\chi^2 < 1, ns$ ). When the White candidate had a higher GPA, participants again showed only

<sup>3</sup> In this and all of the admissions studies we explored a moderating role for participant gender and found little evidence that gender affected our results. In Study 3, for example, both genders chose the candidate with more AP classes the vast majority of the time in all conditions (two controls: men: 39% and 29%, women: 41% and 19%; White with higher GPA: men: 30%, women: 17%) except for the key condition in which the Black candidate had the higher GPA, when preferences reversed for both genders (men: 74%, women: 76%). We thus do not discuss further a role for gender in these studies.

a mild preference, with 56% ranking GPA as more important; when the Black candidate had the higher GPA, however, 84% of participants ranked GPA higher,  $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 9.86, p < .01$  (see Table 2).

**Memory data.** We were interested in whether people would exaggerate their preferred candidate's qualifications. We created difference scores for recall of both GPA and AP classes for the two candidates. For GPA, the overall interaction was marginally significant,  $F(1, 205) = 3.25, p = .07$ . Participants' estimates did not differ when no racial information was provided ( $M_s = 0.15$  and  $0.16, SD_s = 0.04$  and  $0.11, t < 1$ ). Participants who saw a Black candidate with a higher GPA—those participants particularly motivated to see GPA as important—inflated the difference between the two candidates' GPAs ( $M = 0.19, SD = 0.12$ ), whereas those who saw a White candidate with a higher GPA did not ( $M = 0.15, SD = 0.08$ ), a difference that approached significance,  $t(99) = 1.81, p = .073$ .<sup>4</sup> We found no evidence for a similar phenomenon with AP classes ( $F < 1, ns$ ), due primarily to the fact that recall was extremely accurate on this measure, with only a 6% error rate; for GPA, in contrast, the error rate was 14%.

### Discussion

When making a choice between two equally attractive college candidates, participants overwhelmingly selected Black candidates and justified this decision by inflating the importance of whichever qualification favored the Black candidate. When the Black candidate had a higher GPA than the White candidate, participants inflated the importance of GPA, and when the Black candidate had taken more AP classes than the White candidate, participants did not. Study 3 also offers some evidence that casuistry is not merely a strategy intended for public consumption, as participants showed some tendency to misremember differences in qualifications between candidates and, more important, did so in a way that would buttress their preference for Black candidates. It is difficult to imagine participants strategically reporting differences in GPA, both because they had been given instructions regarding accuracy and because misreporting information in this context would be a poor justificatory attempt. These memory distortions occurred after participants had selected candidates; in the next study we examined information processing before selection, to see whether reshaping of qualifications can occur before participants commit themselves to a candidate.

Table 2

*Percentages of Participants Who Selected the Candidate With a Higher Grade-Point Average (GPA) and Ranked GPA as More Important, Study 3*

Condition	Selected candidate with higher GPA	Ranked GPA higher
Control 1 (no race)	23 (12/52)	57 (30/53)
Control 2 (no race)	37 (19/52)	56 (29/52)
White candidate higher GPA	26 (14/54)	56 (30/54)
Black candidate higher GPA	75 (38/51)	84 (42/50)

*Note.* The two control conditions are a result of counterbalancing qualifications.

### Study 4: Temporal Sequence of Casuistry

In Study 3, participants selected candidates and then ranked qualifications after that decision had been made. Decades of research on cognitive dissonance show that individuals inflate the value of selected options to reduce dissonance (e.g., Brehm, 1956). Is the casuistry we find in the present studies simply postdecisional justification, or can the reshaping of qualifications occur prior to a decision (see Brownstein, 2003), on merely being exposed to information that is tainted by social category? In Study 4 we explored whether actual expression of a decision is necessary to witness the established pattern of inflating the importance of qualifications that favor Black candidates. If inflation of qualifications occurs only after decisions have been made, then the process might be seen more as justification: Only after choosing do people feel compelled to reshape criteria. Finding inflation prior to choice would demonstrate that participants do not simply select Black candidates and then inflate the value of whichever criterion favors them but that they may come to see these candidates' qualifications as truly more impressive and make selections on the basis of those qualifications.

### Method

**Participants.** Participants were 154 Princeton undergraduates who completed the questionnaire as part of a mass testing session in groups of up to 20 and were paid \$8 for their participation. Fifty-six percent were female; 62% were White, 15% were Asian, 11% were Black, 4% were Hispanic, 7% reported "other" ethnicity, and 3 participants did not report ethnicity.

**Procedure.** The design was a 2 (qualifications: Black candidate higher GPA/Black candidate more AP classes)  $\times$  2 (select candidate first/rank qualifications first). We used the same resumes as in Study 3, but in Study 4 all resumes included social category information. Participants in the select-first condition picked the candidate they felt was most qualified and then ranked qualifications (as in previous studies). Participants in the rank-first condition were given no indication that they would be asked to choose between candidates, but simply read that we were interested in what qualifications were most important in making admissions decisions and that they could look at a few sample resumes to get a sense of some relevant qualifications. These participants were then given a list of qualifications and asked to rank which they felt were most important in making admission decisions. Only after completing this task were these participants asked to return to the sample resumes and select a candidate.

### Results

**Selection.** As before, the vast majority (79%) of participants selected Black candidates over White candidates,  $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = 52.60, p < .001$ . It is important to note that this effect held regardless of that candidate's qualifications: When the Black candidate had the higher GPA, participants selected him 77% (59/77) of the time, and when he had more AP classes he was chosen 82% (63/77) of the time ( $\chi^2 < 1, ns$ ). Most relevant to the present

<sup>4</sup> Another strategy for exploring memory errors is to test directly for accuracy, by conducting one-sample  $t$  tests (test value = 0.15). Participants accurately remembered the candidates' GPAs when no racial information was attached and when the White candidate had a higher GPA (all  $t_s < 1$ ), but those who saw a Black candidate with a higher GPA significantly inflated the difference between the two candidates' GPAs,  $t(49) = 2.15, p < .04$ .



investigation is that the strong preference for Black candidates did not vary whether participants ranked qualifications first (83%) or selected candidates first (76%,  $\chi^2 < 1$ , *ns*; see Table 3).<sup>5</sup>

**Justification.** Although no consensus on qualifications emerged in selection, GPA was ranked higher than AP classes 71% of the time across versions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = 26.60$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, however, this preference for GPA was moderated by our manipulations. GPA was ranked higher than AP classes 81% (62/77) of the time when the Black candidate had the higher GPA, a number that dropped to 61% (47/77) when the White candidate had the higher GPA,  $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = 7.06$ ,  $p < .01$ . Most important to the present investigation is that the relatively higher ranking for whichever qualification favored the Black candidate was the same whether participants made their selections before ranking qualifications or after (89% vs. 74% when the Black candidate had the higher GPA; 63% vs. 60% when the White candidate did),  $\chi^2(1, N = 154) = 1.51$ , *ns* (see Table 3). Inflation of qualifications, therefore, is not driven only by postdecisional, strategic concerns but also appears to occur even when merely exposed to resumes.

### Discussion

We again found a strong preference for selecting Black candidates regardless of their qualifications. What is most striking about this study is the marked similarity in results for the two conditions. Whether participants selected candidates and then ranked qualifications, or merely glanced at resumes, ranked qualifications, and then made their selections, there was a strong tendency both to select Black candidates and inflate the value of qualifications that favored these candidates. The fact that participants were given no indication that they would have to select between the candidates in the rank-first condition, yet still inflated qualifications, suggests that there is a change in meaning of qualifications when those qualifications are paired with different social categories: Participants did not merely justify their decisions by strategically inflating the value of whichever criterion favored their preferred candidate but actually saw that person's qualifications as more impressive even before knowing they would be asked to select.<sup>6</sup> As in Study 3, in which memories were distorted to support biased decisions, this predecisional inflation we found in the present study suggests that casuistry, although certainly containing strategic elements, also has private components.

### Study 5: Accountability and Casuistry

Having established the phenomenon and found some support for casuistry as a private process, we next wanted to explore the more

public aspects of casuistry, by making the situation more like real-world decisions. In Studies 1 through 4, participants were not called on to explain their decisions. In Study 5, we made the selection process public by asking participants to explain to an interviewer why they selected the candidate they did. Such accountability (Tetlock, 1992) is commonly viewed as means of reducing bias, and one possibility is that making decisions more public would prevent our participants from engaging in casuistry. The effects of accountability pressures are more complex (see Lerner & Tetlock, 1999), however; in some situations accountability can enhance bias, as with its amplifying effect on commitment to decisions (Simonson & Staw, 1992). Accountability thus may do little to improve selection biases and because of its amplification of commitment may increase the extent to which participants engage in casuistry to justify those decisions. We expected participants to continue to select Black candidates when held accountable and to justify their decisions by inflating the value of qualifications that favored Black candidates to an even greater extent.

Finally, our accountability manipulation offered an opportunity to demonstrate people's reluctance to cite race as a factor in decision making. Participants who were made accountable for their decisions were asked to explain after completing the task how they had made their decisions, and we coded their responses for any mention of race.

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred twenty-three Princeton undergraduates took part in groups of up to 4 to fulfill a course requirement. Fifty-seven percent were female; 75% were White, 9% were Black, 9% were Asian, 4% were Hispanic, and 3% reported "other" ethnicity. One participant did not report ethnicity.

**Procedure.** We used the same resumes as in Study 4. Our design was a 2 (qualifications: Black candidate with a higher GPA/Black candidate with more AP classes)  $\times$  2 (accountability/no accountability). After participants arrived in the laboratory, the experimenter told participants in the *accountability* condition that he was pilot testing resumes and thus would ask participants a series of questions after they were done about how they had made their selection and about which qualifications were important in making that decision. Participants in the *no-accountability* condition were simply reminded that their responses were anonymous. Participants then viewed the resumes, made their selection, and completed the other dependent measures. First, participants ranked qualifications in order of importance. As a manipulation check on accountability, we asked participants to rank, on a 7-point scale (range: 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*), how difficult their decision had been. Finally, participants in the accountability condition were taken individually into a private room (so that the other participants could not hear them) and were asked to explain to the exper-

Table 3  
Percentages of Participants Who Selected the Candidate With a Higher Grade-Point Average (GPA) and Ranked GPA as More Important, as a Function of Order of Ranking, Study 4

Condition	Selected candidate with higher GPA	Ranked GPA higher
Black candidate higher GPA		
Rank first	77 (27/35)	89 (31/35)
Select first	76 (32/42)	74 (31/42)
White candidate higher GPA		
Rank first	11 (4/35)	63 (22/35)
Select first	24 (10/42)	60 (25/42)

<sup>5</sup> In Studies 4 through 6 we explored a role for participant race as a moderator. Although it would have been ideal to analyze White and Black participants separately, our small number of Black participants precludes such analyses. The data for White participants alone look very similar to the overall data in Study 4: They selected the candidate with the higher GPA 79% (rank first) and 75% (select first) of the time when that candidate was Black, but these numbers dropped to 10% and 26%, respectively, when that candidate was White.

<sup>6</sup> It is possible that participants were able to guess that they would be asked to make a decision, complicating the degree to which these decisions can truly be seen as private, an issue to which we return in the General Discussion.

imenter how they had made their decision. The experimenter coded the responses for any mention of race.

## Results

**Manipulation check.** As expected, participants who were accountable found the decision more difficult ( $M = 6.47$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) than those who were not accountable ( $M = 6.10$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $t(120) = 1.99$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Selection.** As before, selection was driven by race, not qualifications, as 77% (95/123) of the participants selected Black candidates,  $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 36.50$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants in the no-accountability condition selected the candidate with the higher GPA 70% of the time when that candidate was Black but only 21% of the time when that candidate was White,  $\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 16.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , similar to participants in the accountability condition (77% and 15%, respectively),  $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 20.62$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 4). There was no effect of accountability on candidate selection; although participants were slightly more likely to select the Black candidate when they knew they would be held accountable (81% vs. 74%), this difference was not significant ( $\chi^2 < 1$ , *ns*).

**Justification.** We next checked to see whether participants inflated the value of the qualifications that favored the Black candidate, and they had. In the no-accountability condition, 70% of participants ranked GPA higher when the Black candidate had the higher GPA, whereas only 45% ranked GPA higher when the Black candidate had taken more AP classes,  $\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 4.43$ ,  $p < .05$ , results that were amplified in the accountability condition, in which 81% ranked GPA higher when the Black candidate had the higher GPA, whereas only 30% did so when the Black candidate had taken more AP classes,  $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 13.98$ ,  $p < .001$ . Looking directly at the effect of accountability, although 63% (44/70) of participants in the no-accountability condition ranked whichever qualification favored the Black candidate higher, some 76% (40/53) did so in the accountability condition, although this effect only approached significance,  $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .14$ .

Another method of assessing the impact of accountability on casuistry is to explore whether accountability increased people's consistency in justifying their selections. The overall strength of the relationship of ranking the qualification higher that favored one's chosen candidate was quite high,  $r(123) = .74$ ,  $p < .001$ ; thus, participants who selected a candidate with a higher GPA were quite likely to rank GPA higher. This relationship was weaker for participants in the no-accountability condition, how-

ever,  $r(70) = .68$ , and stronger for those in the accountability condition,  $r(53) = .83$ ,  $Z = 1.92$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Mentions of race in posttask interviews.** After the task, participants in the accountability condition were asked to explain their decisions, and the experimenter coded whether participants mentioned race as a factor in their decisions. Our premise was that people would be reluctant to mention race, and indeed participants were unlikely to do so, as 81% (43/53) did not. In addition, of the participants who did mention race, 8 of 10 mentioned it last when explaining their decisions. We correlated mentions of race with participants' selections and found that those who mentioned race were somewhat more likely to select the Black candidate, although this relationship was only marginally significant ( $r = .23$ ,  $p = .09$ ). When we removed these participants from our selection analyses, the strong preference for the Black candidate still held, as 77% (33/43) still picked this candidate.

## Discussion

Participants who made decisions in private, as in previous studies, overwhelmingly selected Black candidates and inflated the value of qualifications that favored these candidates. Participants under accountability were guilty of these same biases, only more so, as they were even more consistent in their inflation, as reflected in the increased correlation between selection and justification. In addition, we demonstrated participants' reluctance to use race in justifying these decisions. Thus, a necessary precondition for casuistry, a motive to conceal a forbidden preference, was supported.<sup>7</sup>

### Study 6: Precommitment and Casuistry

Given the robustness of both selection and justification biases under conditions of accountability, we next wanted to test another method of eliminating the bias, one used in some form in many organizations: committing people to the criteria they will use to make a decision before any candidates are reviewed. Whereas in previous studies participants selected their candidates, then ranked qualifications (or, in one condition of Study 4, saw resumes before ranking and then selected their candidates), in Study 6 we committed them to their rankings of qualifications before they were given access to any resumes. In this design, if participants rank GPA higher than AP classes, they should be bound to pick the candidate who dominates on that qualification when they are given resumes. If participants continue to make selections on the basis of race despite this commitment, then we expect them to engage in selective reweighting of qualifications, retrospectively increasing the importance of the qualification that favors their candidate. This design also allows us to explore whether participants who ignore their prerankings in order to favor a Black candidate are less certain about their decisions or whether casuistry allows them to

<sup>7</sup> We do not suggest that accountability pressures will never improve selection biases; accountability in the employment studies, for example, may have motivated male participants to base their selections on qualifications. Although the effects of accountability on selection may be varied, we argue that accountability will always increase casuistry, leading participants to inflate qualifications to justify their choices to an even greater degree.

Table 4  
*Percentages of Participants Who Selected the Candidate With a Higher Grade-Point Average (GPA) and Ranked GPA as More Important, as a Function of Accountability, Study 5*

Condition	Selected candidate with higher GPA	Ranked GPA higher
Black candidate higher GPA		
Accountable	77 (20/26)	81 (21/26)
Not accountable	70 (26/37)	70 (26/37)
White candidate higher GPA		
Accountable	15 (4/27)	30 (8/27)
Not accountable	21 (7/33)	45 (15/33)

view their decisions—and thus themselves—as positively as their consistent counterparts.

### Method

**Participants.** Seventy-two Princeton undergraduates completed the questionnaire as part of a mass testing session in groups of up to 20 and were paid \$8 for their participation. Sixty-five percent were female; 61% were White, 15% were Asian, 8% were Black, 8% were Hispanic, and 7% reported “other” ethnicity.

**Procedure.** We used the same resumes as in Studies 4 and 5 but made two modifications to the procedure. First, prior to reviewing any resumes, participants were asked to prerank the eight qualifications in order of importance before they made their selection (and before they knew there was a selection to be made). In contrast to all of the earlier studies, then, participants ranked qualifications without seeing any actual resumes. Participants were then given resumes to review, made their selections, and then were asked to rerank the same qualifications as before. Second, we added two dependent variables designed to assess participants’ impressions of their decisions, asking them how difficult their decision had been, and how confident they were in their decision, both rated on 7-point scales (range: 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*).

### Results

**Prerankings.** There was a strong preference for GPA as being more important than number of AP classes, as 86% of the participants ranked it higher before seeing any candidate resumes overall,  $\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 37.56, p < .001$ , with results—not surprisingly—similar whether participants were going to see a Black candidate with a higher GPA (84%) or a White candidate with a higher GPA (88%; see Table 5). Thus, participants should have been bound to select candidates with higher GPAs in the selection phase, regardless of the race of the candidate who actually had a higher GPA.

**Selection.** This was clearly not the case, however, because, replicating results from earlier studies, 76% of the participants (55/72) selected the Black candidate regardless of qualifications,  $\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 20.06, p < .001$ . Replicating results from earlier studies, 84% of participants selected the candidate with the higher GPA when this candidate was Black, but this number dropped to 32% when that candidate was White,  $\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 20.06, p < .001$  (see Table 5).

**Postrankings.** It is interesting that although participants were not bound by their prerankings in making selections, they appeared to be bound somewhat by their prerankings here, as participants in both conditions still ranked GPA as more important in both conditions: 84% when the Black candidate had the higher GPA, and 74% when the White candidate had the higher GPA. In other words, despite the fact that participants chose the candidate with the higher GPA only 31% of the time when that candidate was White, these participants still reported that GPA was most impor-

tant 74% of the time (see Table 5). This 74% postranking represents a drop from 88% in the prerankings but is not dramatic enough to mirror the results for selection and is not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 72) = 1.24, ns$ .

**Consistent versus inconsistent participants.** The results above reflect the fact that some participants selected candidates with qualifications that did not match participants’ own prerankings of importance. It is not surprising that, of the 27 participants who were inconsistent, nearly all (85%) contradicted their preranking order so that they could select the Black candidate. Did these participants see their decision as less valid as a result of their inconsistency? Hardly—there were no differences between consistent and inconsistent participants when rating how difficult the decision was (consistent:  $M = 5.67, SD = 1.54$ ; inconsistent:  $M = 5.67, SD = 1.14$ ) or how confident they were that they had made the correct decision (consistent:  $M = 4.04, SD = 4.48$ ; inconsistent:  $M = 4.30, SD = 1.33$ ;  $t_s < 1$ ). These results echo those obtained by Batson et al. (2002) in their work on moral hypocrisy, as participants who cheated in a coin flip to assign themselves a positive task failed to update (or downgrade) their feelings of morality as a result.

The fact that posttask ratings of difficulty and confidence do not differ for inconsistent participants may be due to the fact that although the overall correlation between preranking and selection—the extent to which participants who ranked GPA higher selected the candidate with the higher GPA—was low,  $r(72) = .16, p = .18$ , the correlation between postrankings and selection was highly significant,  $r(72) = .42, p < .001$ . Although some participants made inconsistent choices initially, by the end of the task they had made their selections more consistent with their reinterpretations of the importance of the qualifications that favored their selection. Thus, although not all participants who made inconsistent selections changed their postrankings to justify these choices, the trend was to do so.

### Discussion

Despite committing themselves to qualifications before making selections, participants faced with the dilemma of rejecting a Black candidate managed to overcome this obstacle and continue to favor this candidate. Participants whose prerankings allowed them to be consistent when selecting the Black candidate were faced with an easy task. Participants who were forced to be inconsistent (e.g., preranking GPA higher, then selecting a candidate with a lower GPA) were presented with two dilemmas, of which only one could be solved: being consistent with prerankings or selecting the Black candidate. Our participants overwhelmingly chose the inconsistency that would allow them to continue to favor the Black candidate, showing that this desire overwhelmed the desire for consistency. Having made this choice, however, some participants

Table 5  
Percentages of Participants Who Ranked Grade-Point Average (GPA) Higher (Pre- and Postcommitment) and Selected the Candidate With a Higher GPA, Study 6

Candidate	Ranked GPA higher (precommitment)	Selected candidate with higher GPA	Ranked GPA higher (postcommitment)
Black candidate higher GPA	84 (32/38)	84 (32/38)	84 (32/38)
White candidate higher GPA	88 (30/34)	32 (11/34)	74 (25/34)

then altered their postrankings of qualifications in an attempt to regain some of that consistency, as evidenced by the increased correlation between selection and postrankings. Thus, one kind of inconsistency (changing rankings from pre to post) was used to justify another (selecting candidates who violate prerankings).

### Summary of the Admissions Studies

The admissions studies accomplished three main goals. First, we demonstrated casuistry in another domain, one in which our predominantly White participants were motivated to favor members of a different social group. Second, we found some evidence for private aspects of casuistry, as participants made memory errors in line with their biased preferences (Study 3) and reshaped criteria before making selections (Study 4). Third, we demonstrated the robustness of the phenomenon, as manipulations designed to decrease the bias did little to eliminate the effect; accountability pressures, in fact, enhanced participants' tendency to inflate the value of qualifications that favored Black candidates (Study 5), and precommitment simply led some participants to change their rankings of qualifications post hoc to justify their biased choices (Study 6).

The casuistry we witnessed when participants faced the pressures of making choices that favored an in-group (Studies 1 and 2) also occurred when participants made choices that favored an out-group (Studies 3–6). This difference in direction of bias in the employment studies and the admissions studies warrants comment; in the employment studies, male participants favored other men for a job unless forced to forgo that preference, which is hardly an egalitarian or politically correct choice, whereas in the admissions studies this same participant population favored Black candidates, a more egalitarian or politically correct choice. This preference for Black candidates cannot be attributed to our inclusion of female participants in the admissions studies, because gender does not moderate our effects; neither can it be attributed solely to the egalitarian views of our sample, as this same population recently was shown to discriminate against Blacks (e.g., Monin & Miller, 2001). In part, this difference is due to the fact that sexist behavior is more socially sanctioned than racist behavior (e.g., Rodin, Price, Bryson, & Sanchez, 1990). In addition, however, we suggest that the difference is due in part to participants' desire to follow the prevailing norm; in the employment scenario there is some reason to believe that the job truly would be better for a man, and thus participants follow this norm, whereas the strong support for affirmative action among college undergraduates makes favoring Black candidates the norm. These findings are especially interesting when considered in light of theories of aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Our participants are not expressing prejudice in subtle ways—as when licensed by additional information (Darley & Gross, 1983)—but are instead expressing politically correct beliefs when licensed to do so. As outlined in the beginning of this article, we suggest that the forced-choice nature of our paradigm highlights the potential danger of decision making involving social categories, motivating participants to follow the prevailing norm rather than their prejudiced inclinations. Most important for our argument is that, despite the different initial motivations (favoring male candidates vs. favoring Black candidates), participants engage in the same strategy to mask their use of social category information.

### General Discussion

How do individuals engage in biased behavior while retaining a view of the self as objective? The present research was designed to investigate the casuistry that often accompanies such behavior, exploring the process by which individuals' questionable decision making based on social category information can be licensed by their arbitrary inflation of qualifications that favor preferred candidates. We demonstrated the phenomenon in two domains, one in which men inflated the value of experience or education to favor male job candidates and one in which predominantly White participants inflated the importance of GPA or number of AP classes to favor Black candidates for admission to college. The two sets of studies differ, importantly, in participants' motivation to hide their use of social categories, demonstrating the breadth of the phenomenon. In the employment studies, the reason for casuistry is clear, as men masked their preferences for members of their same social category. The admissions studies, on the other hand, reveal that individuals mask use of social category information even when they seek to favor members of different social groups. Both cases, however, share the common feature of using casuistry to mask decision making that is based on questionable desires. Given the small proportion of participants who cited social category information as a factor in their decision making (Studies 1 and 5)—yet the overwhelming proportion of participants in each study who did so—it appears that casuistry is an effective technique in licensing use of social category information.

### *The Public and Private Nature of Casuistry*

In the beginning of this article, we introduced casuistry as a strategy that addresses both the public and private dilemmas in which people confronted with choices like those in our paradigms face: the public fear of being seen as biased and efforts to justify that behavior to others and private concerns about being biased and efforts to rationalize that behavior to oneself. Many of the studies we report here were specifically designed to address this issue. It is quite clear that the phenomenon can be entirely conscious and strategic, as when a sexist employer who reviews resumes wanting to hire a man looks for whichever qualification will favor a male candidate and then announces to the company that the man has been hired on this basis. This would be an effective technique for justification, but casuistry could also involve rationalization: It is also possible that the employer may truly wish to avoid using social category information, despite some sexist attitudes, yet unknowingly allow these stereotypes to influence his review of resumes. This well-intentioned manager may end up picking the man but truly believe that this candidate is more qualified.

Although the studies reported in this article do not offer conclusive evidence that casuistry is in part a private strategy intended for the self, several offer support for such an interpretation. The memory distortions we observed in Study 3, for example, which suggest that individuals reshape not only the relative rankings but also the absolute values of qualifications in order to support preferred conclusions, are difficult to cast as a strategy for public consumption. It is hard to imagine that misrecalling information about candidates would be an effective means of justifying one's decisions to others, who may have access to the original, accurate information. The prechoice reweighting of qualifications in Study 4, as well, seems unlikely to be targeted entirely for public justi-

fication. As alluded to in footnote 6, it is certainly possible that participants anticipated the choice, thus making the shift in rankings prior to choice due more to anticipated dissonance—a point to which we return below. However, even if participants are aware that a choice is imminent, and shift their rankings in anticipation, this is clearly not a strategy intended for public consumption, as there is no need to justify choices to others when one has not committed to any choice. There is reason to justify one's choice to oneself even before one has chosen, however: to reduce one's privately experienced conflict.

The two manipulations we included to mimic more real-world pressures on decision making, accountability, and precommitment also shed light on the nature of casuistry through their collective failure to reduce bias. The fact that many of the studies were conducted in large, anonymous testing sessions may have served to minimize public pressures in general, supporting a view of casuistry as a private process. We used an accountability manipulation in Study 5 specifically to increase public pressure; if casuistry were an entirely public process, then this incentive should have been sufficient to reduce bias. Instead, even in the face of a public explanation of the decision, bias was not reduced, and casuistry—as measured by the increased correlation between selection and justification when participants were held accountable—actually increased. A commitment to qualifications before selection also failed to attenuate bias in Study 6, as participants continued to make selections based on social category even when that choice was inconsistent with their stated rankings of qualifications. Although this may be a conscious strategy, our data suggesting that these inconsistent participants were just as certain of their choice, and found the choice no more difficult, raise the possibility that these subtle shifts occur outside of awareness, or we might expect some acknowledgment that the process was more difficult when participants had to reshape qualifications post hoc. With the exercise of parsing out conscious and unconscious aspects of psychological phenomena a difficult task as always (see Tetlock & Manstead, 1985), it appears probable that casuistry has both public and private functions, serving to justify one's decisions to others and rationalize one's decisions to oneself.

### Casuistry and Dissonance

The view that casuistry is at least in part a private process that serves as a means of rationalizing one's questionable actions to oneself, again echoes those versions of cognitive dissonance theory that stress the role of threats to the self. As we discussed in the beginning of this article, in one sense casuistry can be seen as a form of dissonance reduction; the subtle shift in pre- and post-selection rankings in Study 6, for example, can be seen as a means of reducing dissonance caused by the inconsistency of one's choice with one's previous rankings. The shift in rankings of qualifications prior to selection in Study 4, again, might be seen as due to a desire to reduce the dissonance one expects to experience when actually committing to the questionable choice, supporting an anticipated-dissonance interpretation (Festinger, 1964). Our results have implications for dissonance theory in general, as well. In forced-choice dissonance paradigms in general, dissonance is usually reduced by inflating the value of the chosen option, often on whichever dimension seems most important. Our paradigm complicates this process, as the dimension that seems most important (and in fact is most important, as our selection results clearly

reveal in all studies) is the social category membership of the candidates. We find that despite this new constraint, participants are able to cope with dissonance more creatively, by recruiting alternative attributes to rationalize their decisions.

### Conclusion

The present research demonstrates, in two different domains, how the social world can be (re)constructed both to justify questionable decisions to others and to support a view of the self as unbiased—and, most important, that this restructuring has real repercussions for others: those we judge. More generally, we believe that this restructuring is a common means of abjuring responsibility for one's choices in morally loaded domains, from justifying discriminating against—or in favor of—individuals on the basis of their physical attractiveness to masking one's purchase of pornography by feigning interest in the magazine's journalistic integrity. Most troubling is that if casuistry causes people truly to believe in their justifications, then their subsequent behavior can be seen as dictated by the situation, not by any personal bias or failing. Social psychologists tend to focus on how situations compel behavior; casuistry demonstrates how individuals can creatively structure situations to compel their own behavior. Because the true reasons for decisions are often problematic, individuals look to other aspects of the situation that can be brought to bear, and end up using less diagnostic information to justify their decisions, both to themselves and others.

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