Perceptions of society's view of the power and status of population subgroups:
A quantitative application of Schneider and Ingram's social construction theory

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CESR-SCHAEFFER
WORKING PAPER SERIES

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Abstract

Schneider and Ingram (1993) posited that society's view of certain groups plays a powerful role in institutionalizing the level of power and status of those groups. While the theory was well developed by Schneider and Ingram, little is known empirically about how the public's perceptions of the power and status of certain groups align with policies and elite messaging.   We examine that link using a large sample from the Understanding America Study. We use this data to create "meta-constructions", which are measures of how individuals perceive societal views of status and power of populations grouped by gender, race, and urbanicity. We first compare our findings with Schneider and Ingram's quadrants of idealized population categorization. We then consider how views of gender, race, and urbanicity differ across individuals with different social characteristics, finding that more powerful groups are more likely to view society as being more equal than less powerful groups.

Keywords: Social Construction prejudice stereotype

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One perennial paradigm for examining variations in public policy is the theory of social constructionism which looks at how policies are targeted toward various groups that are defined by their political and societal power. While this theory of knowledge has its roots in sociology and communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009) it has been used to explain the development and persistence of public policies, from welfare to old age programs. Schneider and Ingram (1993) adapted the paradigm to the study of policy by considering a longstanding question in the field of public policy, "Who gets what?" (Laswell, 1936). Central to the author's theory is the concept of target populations. The target populations are defined in terms of social constructions, which involve the "cultural characterizations" or "popular images" (Schneider and Ingram, 1993:334) of these populations. Schneider and Ingram argue that social constructions, that is, public perceptions of constructs such as political power and societal status of population groups, play an important role in shaping policies that affect those groups.

Early criticism of Schneider and Ingram's theory contended that these social constructions could not be assessed empirically (e.g., Sabatier, 1999). An expanding body of literature has addressed this concern (e.g. Pierce, Siddiki, Jones, Schumacher, Pattison, and Peterson, 2014; Bell, 2019; Kreitzer and Smith, 2018). These studies shed light on numerous aspects of the theory through empirical investigation but rely on convenience samples that are not population representative and therefore fall short of the level of rigor needed to uphold or dismiss the theory of social constructions. The only study using a nationally representative

sample to compare social constructions of multiple target populations is more than two decades old (Link and Oldendick, 1996). Thus, much of Schneider and Ingram's theory remains untested in any rigorous manner. To address this issue, we relied upon a nationally representative sample to study social constructions within the general population. We begin the paper by providing a brief overview of social construction theory, highlighting Schneider and Ingram's concept of target populations. We then describe the data used in this paper and outline our analytical approach. We present substantive findings—i.e., social constructions of the target populations included in our analysis.

Literature Review

Berger and Luckman (1967) developed the social construction paradigm in the late 1960's, addressing the question: *How do beliefs and perceptions about groups become institutionalized so that the collective belief endures?* The authors theorized that individuals and groups create an understanding of reality through a series of social interactions. Through repeated interaction, society institutionalizes these groups and social constructions are created. These social constructions serve as a cognitive shortcut, providing individuals an easy way to organize reality (Fiske and Taylor, 1984).

Schneider and Ingram (1993) applied the social construction paradigm to the field of public policy. In that seminal piece, the authors explain that the social construction of groups plays an important role in shaping public policies that affect these groups. Schneider and Ingram refer to groups affected by public policies as target populations. Public policies emerge from the present social construction of target populations. In turn, they influence the future
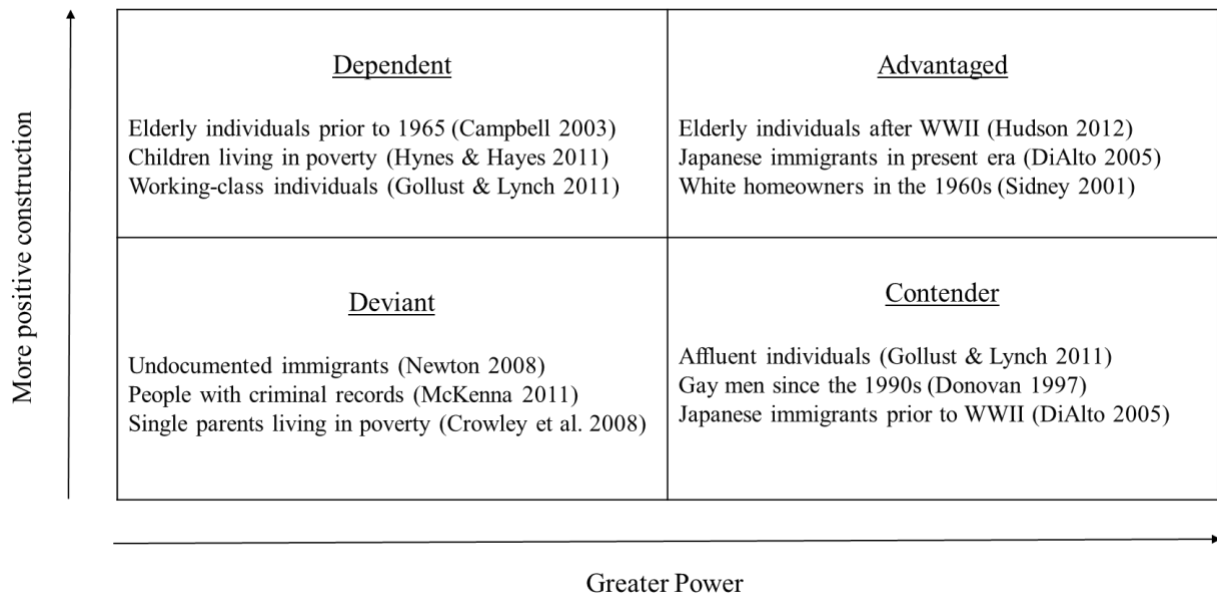
social construction of groups by either maintaining the current social construction or by reshaping it.

Schneider and Ingram (1993) organized the social construction of target populations along two dimensions: power and construction. The dimension of power refers to societal perceptions of a target population as either strong or weak. Society perceives powerful groups as having the ability to mobilize to achieve social and political goals. For instance, some scholars classify retired workers as a powerful target population, because they have demonstrated their ability to achieve policy goals through advocacy organizations such as AARP (e.g., Hudson and Gonyea, 2012). On the other hand, society views weak groups as being unable to achieve political or social objectives on their own behalf—for instance, children living in poverty (Hynes and Hayes, 2011).

The dimension of construction refers to societal perception of a target population in either positive or negative terms. Society will generally approve of beneficial policies directed towards positively constructed groups, perceived as deserving such policies, but may disapprove of beneficial policies directed towards negatively constructed groups, seeing them as undeserving. Combining the power and construction dimension, Schneider and Ingram (1993) propose four, ideal-type categories into which target populations may fall: advantaged, contenders, dependent, and deviant. These target populations are depicted in Figure 1, along with examples from previous literature.

Figure 1

Heuristic Diagram of Target Population Quadrants

More positive construction	**Dependent** Elderly individuals prior to 1965 (Campbell 2003) Children living in poverty (Hynes & Hayes 2011) Working-class individuals (Gollust & Lynch 2011)	**Advantaged** Elderly individuals after WWII (Hudson 2012) Japanese immigrants in present era (DiAlto 2005) White homeowners in the 1960s (Sidney 2001)
	Deviant Undocumented immigrants (Newton 2008) People with criminal records (McKenna 2011) Single parents living in poverty (Crowley et al. 2008)	**Contender** Affluent individuals (Gollust & Lynch 2011) Gay men since the 1990s (Donovan 1997) Japanese immigrants prior to WWII (DiAlto 2005)

Greater Power

The category in which a target population falls shapes the type of public policies

directed toward the group, as well as the messaging that public officials use to justify these

policies. These policies and messaging not only reinforce the category of the target population,

but also lay the ground for future policies directed toward the group by showing which types of

citizens are deserving of beneficial policies and which types are not. Schneider and Ingram

(1993) refer to this cycle as *policy feedback*. Over time, the cycle may also affect the political

participation of target populations, who internalize their socially constructed status.

Combining the power and construction dimension, Schneider and Ingram (1993)

propose four categories into which target populations may fall. While it is possible, in this

theory, for a social construction to change as a result of this policy cycle, the starting point of any group is where they are in that period. In the Schneider and Ingram archetype, advantaged groups enjoy both a high level of political power and a positive social construction. Thus, assuming the group as a whole acts rationally, the seeming "goal" of all groups in social construction theory is to become an advantaged group. That is because in terms of public policies, these groups generally receive more benefits than would be warranted by the size of the groups or the effectiveness of the policy for society generally. Advantaged groups tend to have a favorable view of the political system, and thus participate through traditional means such as voting, volunteering and campaign contributions. In the literature, studies about groups becoming advantaged are extant. Some examples include the elderly (Hudson and Gonyea, 2012; Chard, 2002), Japanese immigrants (DiAlto, 2005), and White homeowners in the 1960s (Sidney, 2001).

Other groups, Contenders with their high levels of power and negative constructions receive benefits that are generally hidden from public view, while their burdens are symbolic at best. That is that the burdens actually have few negative effects in reality. Contenders see government in terms of power rather than problem solving and may use more informal means of political participation such as lobbying or protests. In the literature, authors have cited some interesting examples, including affluent individuals (Gollust and Lynch, 2011) and gay men (Donovan 1997).   In many ways, Dependents are the antithesis of Contenders. This group is characterized by low levels of power and a favorable view in society. Because of the positive view the public has, elites want to appear to be aligned with their interests, but the lack of power that dependents possess makes it difficult to direct resources toward them. In many

ways, the policy cycle traps them in the dependent category because they tend to have little say in the policies that are directed towards them, and receipt of those benefits is often coupled with stigmatizing labels and extensive oversight by the program administration. This may lead to a disempowering internalization of the political rhetoric in which they feel powerless and outside the political process. Examples of social construction studies of dependents include elderly individuals prior to 1965 (Campbell, 2003), children living in poverty (Hynes and Hayes, 2011), and working-class individuals (Gollust and Lynch, 2011).

Just as Dependents were the antithesis of Contenders, Deviants are the antithesis of Advantaged. Deviant groups possess low levels of power and a negative social construction. These groups tend to receive few, if any, benefits from government policies and large share of burdens. The rhetoric around these groups tends to focus on negative stereotypes of the groups and the subsequent policies have a focus that is in some part rooted in punishment. Generally, the policies are framed as beneficial but do so in a way that attempts to create the change through authoritarian means, rather than addressing the underlying structural inequalities which cause the problems. Deviant groups are unlikely to participate in any political process and thus habituate in the Deviant category. Studies in the existing literature on this group includes undocumented immigrants (Newton, 2008), people with criminal records (McKenna 2011), and single parents living in poverty (Crowley et al., 2008).

Data

In this paper, we gauge Americans' perceptions of the power and construction of various target populations. Our analysis represents an initial attempt to explore how national

surveys may be used to learn about the social construction of target populations. We address two research questions:

1. How useful are population mean scores in understanding the social construction of target populations?

2. What can be learned by exploring how perceptions of target populations differ within the population?

To address these questions, we used data from the nationally representative, Understanding America Study (UAS). The UAS is an Internet panel study of approximately 7,000 adult residents of the United States. Panel members are recruited using addressed-based samples (ABS) methods. Individuals who do not have digital access are provided a tablet and Internet connection. Panel members have the opportunity to complete one or more surveys on a monthly basis, in English or Spanish. These surveys cover a wide array of topics, including demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, political affiliation, financial literacy, and personality, among other topics. Alattar, Messel, and Rogofsky (2018) describe the methodology of the study in greater detail. The questions that we analyzed were fielded as part of UAS 135 in May and June of 2018; 4,679 panel members completed the survey and had a response rate of 76%. All analyses are weighted to the most recent Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC). UAS data is made available to registered UAS users.

Social Construction Measures

In this paper, we analyze results of asking the following questions to gauge individual's perceptions of political power and social construction:

1. Political Power: "Please rate the following groups of U.S. residents in terms of their political power, that is, how much politicians and lawmakers care about what the group wants." (Response options include very low societal power (1), low power (2), moderate power (3), high power (4), and very high power (5).)

2. Social Construction: "Thinking about those groups of U.S. residents in terms of how U.S. society generally views them, would you say the view is mostly negative, positive or somewhere in between?" (Response options include negative (1), somewhat negative (2), neither positive nor negative (3), somewhat positive (4), and positive.)

These questions differ from most previous studies of social construction, in that our studies uses direct questioning. Previous studies suggest that direct questioning may not elicit accurate perceptions of power and constructions. These studies use indirect methods, such as survey-based experiments (e.g., Gollust and Lynch, 2011) or the analysis of administrative data (e.g., Link and Oldendick, 1996).

Our questions aim to measure a different phenomenon than an individual's social construction of social groups. Instead, we aim to measure how individuals perceive that society views different social groups in a collective sense. This flips the script on traditional questioning. We refer to our measures as meta-constructions—the ways that individuals perceive that different groups function within society.

We believe that this approach may be effective, as present-day social norms might prevent individuals from expressing negative beliefs about gender or racial minority groups. Some research suggests that, as an alternative to the expression of negative beliefs about different groups, the modern power structure is upheld by a narrative that society is more equal than empirical facts might support—e.g., that women are equal in power to men, that African Americans are viewed as positively as White Americans. Given this framework, the expect that groups that have greater power—in particular, non-Hispanic White men—might perceive the social structure as more equitable than other groups do. That is, they might score other groups as relatively equal in power and construction, while less powerful groups (e.g. women, racial/ethnic minorities) might perceive substantial differences between groups. These meta-constructions capture individual's views about where social groups fall in terms of the power structure and general social perceptions, when compared with other groups.

We expect meta-construction measures to operate differently than traditional measures of social construction. For instance, in terms of support for government policies, we would expect individuals who view certain social groups as having more power to be in less need of supportive government interventions. Likewise, we would expect that groups perceived to have more positive social constructions would be viewed as having lesser need of actions to improve their lower social position.

We examined meta-construction scores among population subgroups of survey respondents, using measures constructed by the UAS from information provided by participants indicating their gender, race and Hispanic/Latino status. The race/ethnicity variable

combines separate questions about race and Hispanic/Latino heritage to create discrete categories of non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic black or African American, and Hispanic/Latino survey respondents.

Defining Target Populations

We asked participants to consider society views on target populations on three different bases: gender (men versus women); racial/ethnic groups (White Americans versus African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans), and urbanicity (suburban residents, urban residents, and rural residents).

Gender. Few studies have compared the political power and social construction of women and men. We expect that women as a group may be perceived as having less political power and, perhaps, less positive social constructions. We also expect that male respondents will perceive the gender gap in political power as being narrower compared to perceptions of female respondents.

Race/Ethnicity and Immigrant Status. A small number of studies compare the political power and social construction of racial/ethnic groups, although the evidence is not entirely clear in classifying these groups into Schneider and Ingram's (1993) quadrants. In a national survey, Link and Oldendick (1996) found that non-Hispanic White respondents viewed Black Americans as having the least positive social construction, followed by Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and White Americans. Studies of Asian Americans have generally focused on earlier periods, particularly before and during World War II (e.g. DiAlto, 2005). Courchane, Darolia and Galiey (2015), however, found that Asian Americans are generally considered to have high levels of

social power and thus do not receive the same negative attention as African American and Hispanic Americans when providing lending services. Few studies have investigated the social construction of Hispanic Americans apart from immigrant status. Hussey and Pearson-Merkowitz (2013) found that negative views about social service utilization among undocumented immigrants do not extend to Hispanic Americans generally. To date, the relationship between explorations of documented immigrants and Hispanic immigrants has not been explored. The literature indicates that some immigrant groups, including women and children (Short and Magana, 2002), students (Reich and Barth 2010), and the elderly (following the passage of welfare reform) (Yoo, 2002) may be classified as "dependent", while undocumented immigrants are considered "deviant" (Newton, 2008; Short and Magana, 2002).

Urbanicity. No prior studies of social construction have focused specifically on urbanicity. However, there is some evidence that the intersection of urbanicity and racial/ethnicity—i.e. the "race-place" connection—may be important in developing constructions. Much of this research has focused on low-income Black individuals living in urban centers (e.g., Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson, 2012). These constructions include terms such as the *urban underclass*, which suggests that residents of these areas may be classified as dependent or deviant. These constructions may have detrimental policy effects. Garrow (2012) finds that while poor neighborhoods generally receive more government funding, this relationship reverses as the percentage of African American residents increases (also see Sidney, 2012). Another emerging "race-place" connection may be the association of rural, White Americans with poverty, disability, and the opioid epidemic (see Case and Deaton, 2015; Snyder, 2016). In contrast to urban and rural areas, suburban areas are likely seen as areas of opportunities. As a result, we

predict that suburban residents may be perceived to have greater power and more positive constructions.

Methodology

We used descriptive methods to (1) characterize survey population mean scores and (2) explore different perceptions within the population. To address the latter question, we consider differences by survey respondents' self-identified racial/ethnic identification and gender. While we hypothesize that these characteristics represent sociological lines along which different perceptions may lie, they are only two of many potential ways to divide the population. All analyses use survey weights. (See Alattar, Messel, and Rogofsky (2018) for a description of survey weighting)

Results

We calculated weighted population means for each of our two measures. As Figure 2 indicates, the measures do not easily divide the population into Schneider and Ingram's four quadrants. This is in part because perceptions of political power and social construction are moderately to highly correlated across subgroups (with r-values ranging from .45 to .6). As a result, subgroups tend to fall into either the advantaged or deviant categories, when considering mean scores alone. One alternative is to take one measure—say political power—and to consider how the other measure—social construction, in this instance— deviates from it. Groups that are perceived to have greater political power (average scores of 3.0 or higher) and equal or greater social construction might fall into the *advantaged*

category. This includes White Americans and men in our data. Groups perceived to have high

levels of political power, but significantly lower construction scores might fall into the

contender category. This includes women and suburban residents. On the other hand, groups

that are perceived to have less political power (average scores lower than 3.0) and equal or

less positive social construction might fall into the *deviant* category. This includes

documented and undocumented immigrants, as well as Hispanic Americans, in our data.

Finally, those perceived to have less political power, but more positive social construction

might fall into the *dependent* category. This includes African Americans in our data. Other

groups, such as Asian Americans and urban residents, do not fall into any of the categories

statistically.

Figure 2

Mean Power and Construction Scores of Target Populations
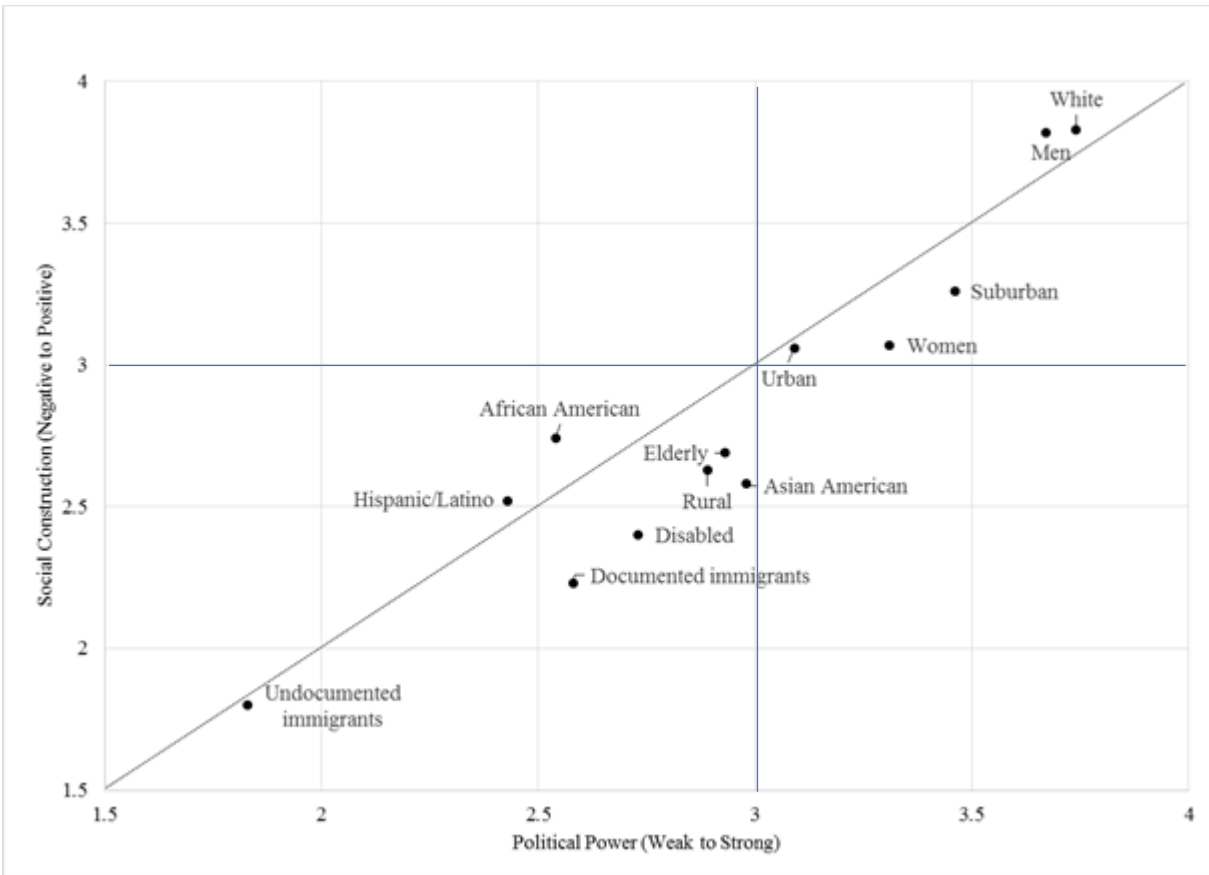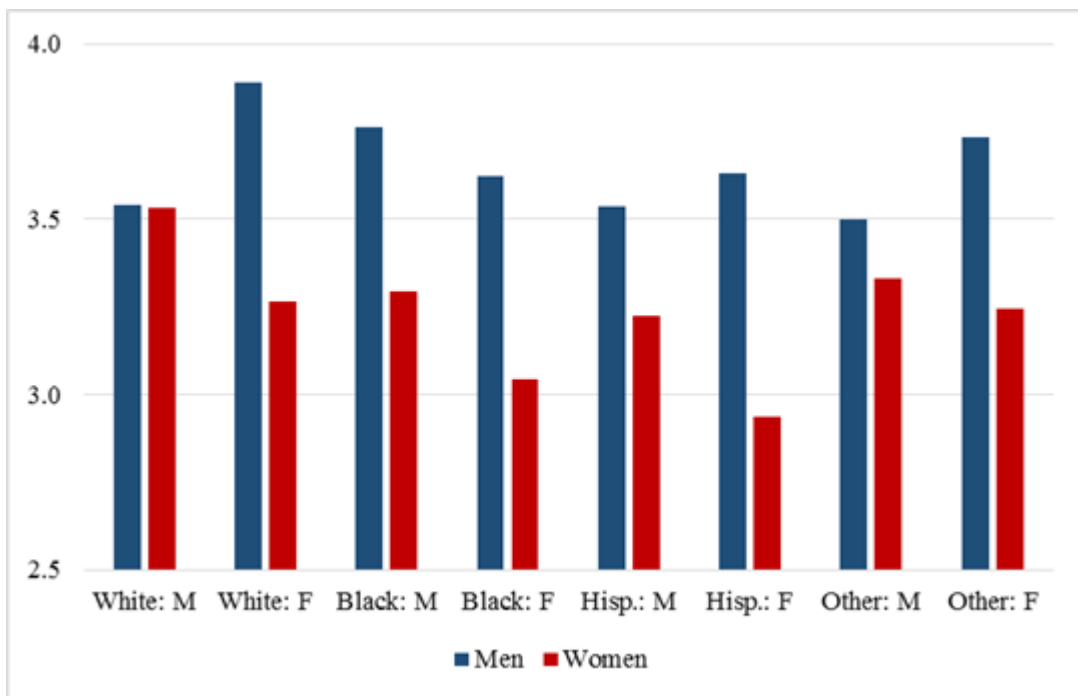
Source: Understanding America Study

Measures of central tendency imply a population-level consensus. The second part of our analysis focused on the ways in which population subgroups view social construction of their own groups compared to other groups. Several divisions exist along which social constructions may fall. We consider two: race and gender.

Views of gender. Relative to other subgroups, both women and men are perceived to have greater political power and more positive social construction. The perceived power and construction of men substantially exceed those of women, however. Overall, the average political power score of men is .38 higher than that of women, while the social construction

score is .75 higher. Our analysis of meta-construction measures in racial/ethnic respondent subgroups found that only non-Hispanic White respondents contradicted this trend. Figure 3 shows that while non-Hispanic White men view men and women as equal in political power (average scores of 3.54 and 3.53, respectively), non-Hispanic White women perceive large differences in power (average scores of 3.89 and 3.26, respectively). All other groups of women, as well as Hispanic men, view women as having less power. Meanwhile, nearly all groups view men as having a more positive social construction than women do (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Figure 3

Differences in meta-constructions of men and women, by race and gender

Source: Understanding America Study

Views of race/ethnicity. Each racial/ethnic respondent group views White Americans in general as having greater political power and more positive social construction compared to African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans. However, the power gap perceived by non-Hispanic White respondents is smaller than the gap perceived by other groups. This is primarily driven by non-Hispanic White men, who on average score White Americans lower on power and positive constructions compared to scores provided by other respondents. (see Table 2).

Views of urbanicity. All groups in the survey view suburban residents as having more power and a more positive construction compared to urban and rural residents (see Table 3). Yet, non-Hispanic White respondents perceive a relatively small gap between suburban and urban residents on average and see rural residents as having substantially less power and a less positive construction. Non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents, on the other hand, view a larger gap between suburban residents and those living in urban and rural areas. They score the latter two groups similarly low in measures of power and construction.

Discussion

In this paper, we aim to advance the empirical application of Schneider and Ingram's (1993) theory of social construction. We do so by relying on a series of questions that measure individual's meta-construction of how different target populations fall on a hierarchy of power and social construction. We use questions from the nationally representative UAS internet panel. Our initial analysis provides several lessons in how survey research might be used to study social constructions. First, we find that studying the population mean perceptions of target populations is of limited use. Using these means belies differences in perceptions within

the population. Investigating differences along two sociological lines—racial/ethnic

identification and gender—reveals several findings of interest. The fact that groups do not fall

into the four categories does not represent the primary concern with using population means,

however. A central concern with using population means is that measures of central tendency

imply a population-level consensus. This may be far from the case empirically. Furthermore,

Schneider and Ingram suggest that divisions in perception of power and construction of

subgroups is a rule rather than an exception. Using population averages also assumes that

individual perceptions have an equal weight in shaping policies. This is far from the case.

Sociological and Political Science literature clearly demonstrate that White Americans, men,

and wealthy individuals historically have had greater structural advantage in turning their social

perceptions to political realities than have minority groups, women, and those of lower

socioeconomic status. We discuss these findings in more detail below.

To begin, White men differ from white women and from Black and Hispanic/Latino

respondents in that they believe that women and men have roughly equal levels of political

power. Another finding of interest is that groups perceived to be more powerful tend to view

society as more equal in terms of power and construction than less powerful groups do. This

pattern is particularly apparent in White respondents' views of African and Hispanic Americans.

While the majority of White respondents view White Americans as have more power and a

more positive construction than African and Hispanic Americans, there is a greater tendency for

White respondents to view these groups as having equal power and construction. This view of

equality is most common among White respondents without a college degree. In the face of

substantial racial inequalities in the United States, these views of racial equality among White

respondents may reflect Bonilla-Silva's (2010) concept of *colorblind racism*. On the other hand, it may reflect a different phenomenon altogether. Further research is warranted. For example, it is interesting to note, the view of racial equality is also more common among Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents with low levels of education than those with a college degree. Both urban and rural residents are viewed as having less and a more negative construction than suburban residents. Consequently, both groups may be seen as in need of policy intervention.

The study is subject to the limitations inherent in all survey research that relies on population samples. To mitigate any biasing effects from UAS' sample design or differential non-response, the UAS uses a two-stage weighting procedure. We included these weights in casting our estimates. Questions about societal power and status may also be subject to bias from social desirability answering or may not elicit accurate perceptions of social construction, however, these potential sources of bias are likely to be mitigated or eliminated by the use of self-administered questionnaires in internet survey research, and our use of meta-construction measures. This study substantially extends prior research on social constructs, by analyzing results of administering these survey measures in a large population-representative national sample. In this way, we were able to more reliably examine individual perceptions of the political power and social construction of certain groups.

Limitations and Future Research

In future research, we will look at other factors that predict social constructions of target populations, such as educational attainment and political affiliation. We will also consider whether meta-constructions relate to support for policies aimed at specific target

populations, and whether the construction of one's own group relates to political efficacy and

participation. Finally, to the extent that the survey items included in this study—or similar

ones—are repeated, we will study how these meta-constructions change over time.

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Appendix A:

Tables and Figures

Table A1

Meta-Constructions of Gender by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

		Non-Hispanic White		Non-Hispanic Black		Hispanic/Latino		Non-Hispanic Other	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Men	Political Power	3.54	**3.89**	3.76	3.62	3.54	3.63	3.50	3.73
	Social Construction	3.68	**3.92**	3.89	3.70	3.85	3.97	3.75	3.83
Women	Political Power	3.53	**3.26**	3.29	**3.04**	**3.22**	**2.93**	3.33	3.25
	Social Construction	3.34	**2.99**	**3.01**	**2.98**	**2.95**	**2.71**	3.03	2.89

Source: Understanding America Study

Note: **Bolded** figures represent a significant difference from the average perception of non-Hispanic White male respondents.

Table A2

Meta-Constructions of Racial and Immigrant Groups by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

		Non-Hispanic White		Non-Hispanic Black		Hispanic/Latino		Non-Hispanic Other	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
White American	Political Power	3.61	**3.77**	**3.94**	**3.90**	**3.89**	3.76	3.65	3.76
	Social Construction	3.64	3.74	**4.19**	**4.07**	**4.26**	**4.04**	3.80	3.91
African American	Political Power	2.69	2.59	**2.37**	**2.34**	**2.25**	**2.19**	2.58	2.59
	Social Construction	2.97	**2.79**	**2.42**	**2.40**	**2.48**	**2.29**	2.82	2.79
Hispanic American	Political Power	2.55	**2.41**	2.31	**2.16**	2.42	2.28	2.50	2.39
	Social Construction	2.68	**2.47**	**2.37**	**2.23**	2.54	**2.32**	2.64	2.61
Documented Immigrants	Political Power	2.67	2.60	**2.33**	**2.42**	2.51	2.49	2.73	2.56
	Social Construction	2.26	2.23	2.12	2.20	2.20	2.23	2.19	2.28
	Political Power	1.84	1.75	1.86	1.89	1.88	1.97	1.84	1.89

Undocumented   Social Construction

Immigrants	1.85	1.73	1.83	1.91	1.68	1.83	1.82	1.77

Source: Understanding America Study

Note: **Bolded** figures represent a significant difference from the average perception of non-Hispanic White male respondents.

Table A3

Meta-Constructions of Urbanicity by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

		Non-Hispanic White		Non-Hispanic Black		Hispanic/Latino		Non-Hispanic Other	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Suburban Residents	Political Power	3.46	3.53	3.58	3.33	3.34	3.34	3.38	3.43
	Social Construction	3.31	3.23	3.35	3.35	3.25	**3.01**	3.36	3.28
Urban Residents	Political Power	3.12	**3.26**	2.91	**2.59**	2.94	2.84	3.17	3.28
	Social Construction	3.24	3.11	**2.70**	**2.63**	2.98	**2.70**	3.19	3.08
Rural Residents	Political Power	2.95	2.86	3.03	**2.65**	2.95	2.74	3.00	3.01
	Social Construction	2.69	2.59	2.83	2.64	2.54	2.51	2.57	2.57

Source: Understanding America Study

Note: Bolded figures represent a significant difference from the average perception of non-Hispanic White male respondents.