

# UNDERSTANDING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

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Faye J. Crosby

*Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz,  
California 95064; email: fjcrosby@ucsc.edu*

Aarti Iyer

*School of Psychology, University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4QG,  
United Kingdom; email: a.iyer@exeter.ac.uk*

Sirinda Sincharoen

*Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz,  
California 95064; email: sirinda@qc2.com*

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■ **Abstract** Affirmative action is a controversial and often poorly understood policy. It is also a policy that has been widely studied by social scientists. In this review, we outline how affirmative action operates in employment and education settings and consider the major points of controversy. In addition, we detail the contributions of psychologists and other social scientists in helping to demonstrate why affirmative action is needed; how it can have unintended negative consequences; and how affirmative action programs can be most successful. We also review how psychologists have examined variations in people's attitudes toward affirmative action, in part as a means for testing different theories of social behavior.

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## INTRODUCTION

Affirmative action means many things to many people. Over the past 40 years, the policy has been challenged in courts as well as in the organizations and university campuses where it has been implemented. The latest moment of contention came in 2003, when the U.S. Supreme Court decided the landmark cases involving the University of Michigan. Due in part to the importance of the Michigan cases, the past few years have witnessed an outpouring of research and writing on the topic of affirmative action, a fair portion of which has been produced by psychologists. The aim of our review is to introduce readers to the issues surrounding the policy and practice of affirmative action. In so doing, we highlight the major ways that legal scholars and social scientists, especially psychologists, have conducted research in this area.

### Scope of this Review

The affirmative action literature that we review has three characteristics worthy of initial comment. First, publications on affirmative action are increasingly empirical. Anecdotes, autobiographies, and armchair philosophizing about affirmative action predominated until the mid-1980s, but since the 1990s, this approach has largely given way to empiricism. Second, the work has become truly interdisciplinary, stretching across the fields of education, law, sociology, and economics (e.g., Bergmann 1996, Cordes 2004, Cunningham et al. 2002, Hochschild 1999, Leonard 1996, Munro 1995, Reskin 1998), as well as psychology. Third, a significant portion of the psychological research is of an applied nature, by which we mean it applies basic theories and concepts to topics concerning affirmative action. From time to time, researchers (e.g., DeBono & Snyder 1995, Mellema & Bassili 1995) use the issue of affirmative action simply as a convenient way to test theories that have nothing to do with the specifics of affirmative action per se. Often, however, social scientists seek to make contributions to both the basic understanding of human behavior and the issues involved in creating and implementing social policies.

Although we seek to be comprehensive in the topics we cover, we do not claim to be exhaustive in our citations. The explosion of studies in recent years is great, and our space is limited. More references can be found in any of the recent major reviews of the vast literature on affirmative action (Crosby 2004, Crosby et al. 2003, Kravitz et al. 1997, Pincus 2003, Taylor-Carter et al. 1995).

We begin with a brief section on definitions, as research shows that people continue to be misinformed about what affirmative action is (Arriola & Cole 2001, Kravitz et al. 2000, Kravitz & Platania 1993, Schwindt et al. 1998, Zamboanga et al. 2002), and we know that one's understanding of affirmative action colors one's reactions to it (Golden et al. 2001). In the second section, we review the ways that social scientists have contributed to the national debates on affirmative action. The third section of our review addresses attitudes toward affirmative action.

We consider the factors that predict people's attitudes toward affirmative action, noting the implications of this research for larger theoretical questions concerning societal inequality.

## What is Affirmative Action?

Affirmative action occurs whenever an organization devotes resources (including time and money) to making sure that people are not discriminated against on the basis of their gender or their ethnic group. Affirmative action has the same goal as equal opportunity, but differs from equal opportunity in being proactive (Burstein 1994). Equal opportunity is a passive policy that seeks to ensure that discrimination will not be tolerated once it is detected. In contrast, with affirmative action, organizations use established practices not only to subvert, but also to avert, discrimination (Crosby & Cordova 1996). One traditional form of affirmative action has involved reserving federal procurement dollars for minority-owned and women-owned businesses. Although set-asides no longer operate in the same fashion as in the past (Holt 2003), extensive econometric research has generally, but not unequivocally (Myers & Chan 1996), verified the effectiveness of the federal, state, and local procurement programs in enabling minority- and women-owned businesses to gain economic footholds (Bendick & Egan 1999).

Also effective is the type of affirmative action that is mandated by Executive Order (EO) 11246. Signed by President Johnson in 1965, EO 11246 stipulates that federal agencies must have affirmative action plans, as must any firm that is above a certain size and does more than minimal business with the federal government. Affirmative action plans allow organizations to monitor their own performance and devise corrections if they find themselves to be guilty of de facto discrimination (Button & Rienzo 2003). To determine whether it is guilty of discrimination, an organization performs prescribed sets of calculations by which, in essence, it examines whether or not it employs women and people of color in proportion to their availability in the qualified labor pool. Only when utilization falls short of the available pools of talent must the organization devise corrective steps.

Affirmative action in education operates in much the same way as in employment. Although the use of explicit quotas or set-asides has been outlawed since 1978, colleges and universities have continued to treat characteristics such as race as "plus factors" when making selections among qualified candidates for admission or for scholarships (Crosby et al. 2003, Lehman 2004).

Race-sensitive admissions practices in higher education have been challenged recently in the Michigan cases known as *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (Stohr 2004). In October 1997, Jennifer Gratz, a white woman, sued the undergraduate college of the University of Michigan because she was denied admission while black students with lower test scores and grade point averages were admitted. Six weeks after Gratz filed her case, Barbara Grutter, another white woman, sued the University of Michigan Law School on similar grounds. Having heard both cases in tandem, the Supreme Court held on June 23, 2003, that

race-sensitive admissions policies were constitutionally permissible because the state has a compelling interest in assuring diversity among the student bodies of state-sponsored schools. The Court also ruled that the undergraduate admissions policy was not narrowly enough tailored to withstand strict scrutiny, whereas the law school's more individualized policy was sufficiently narrowly tailored. Subsequent to the ruling, the University of Michigan changed the practices for admission to the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts to individualize the process.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

### Why is Affirmative Action Needed?

Many psychologists have proposed that affirmative action is needed in order to assure the diversity of student bodies and workforces (Miller 1997), an argument that was central to the Michigan cases. Another argument for affirmative action is that it helps insure that selection procedures and decisions are fair. This argument has special relevance to public debates (e.g., Crosby & Clayton 2004, Crosby et al. 2003) and was also part of the amicus brief submitted by the American Psychological Association in the Michigan cases (Am. Psychol. Assoc. 2003).

**DIVERSITY** Commentators have long claimed that affirmative action is needed to help bring diversity to American schools and businesses (Tierney 1997). Until recently, the evidence for affirmative action as a facilitator of ethnic minority access to higher education involved tracking enrollment figures over time and thus was, at best, circumstantial (Allen et al. 2003, Crosby & Clayton 2004). In 1998, however, William Bowen and Derek Bok, former presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities, respectively, published the landmark *The Shape of the River* (Bowen & Bok 1998). Their book provided the first large-scale quantitative examination of the consequences of affirmative action.

**Ways to increase diversity** Many note that race-sensitive admissions policies and other forms of affirmative action enhance diversity. To examine this issue, Bowen & Bok (1998) presented detailed analyses of data from more than 80,000 students who had matriculated at 28 elite colleges and universities in 1951, 1976, and 1989. One key finding was that race-sensitive admissions policies significantly increased the numbers of African Americans who were admitted to, and who attended, the schools in the study. Contrary to the assumption—made by commentators such as Shelby Steele (1991)—that there would be a high attrition rate among ethnic minority students, those admitted as a result of race-sensitive policies graduated at the same rate as white students. Additional analyses have shown that colleges and universities cannot achieve ethnic diversity through programs that aim to expand the social classes represented in the student bodies (Kane 2003). As Bowen & Rudenstine (2003) argue, furthermore, it would be intellectually dishonest to see

ethnicity or race as equal in historical importance to other dimensions of diversity such as social class.

Although Bowen & Bok (1998) were the first to provide quantitative data about the effects of race-sensitive admissions, they were not the last. In 2000, Lempert et al. (2000a) published their study of minority students who had graduated from the University of Michigan Law School between 1970 (the first year that the Law School graduating class included at least 10 students from underrepresented groups) and 1996. During the 27 years covered by the study, the Law School admissions procedures took into account race or ethnicity in a number of different ways, with the result that the proportion of minority students increased over time.

At variance with the assessment that affirmative action helps increase diversity is a recent analysis of data for some 27,000 students who were admitted to accredited law schools in 1991 and were tracked through law school and beyond (Sander 2004). The data showed that African Americans attended higher-tier law schools than did whites with comparable credentials and that African Americans were much less likely than whites to complete law school or to pass the bar. Initial credentials were highly predictive of class standing, which in turn helped predict graduation and likelihood of passing the bar. While acknowledging the historical impact of race-sensitive admissions policies (e.g., a sevenfold increase in the percentage of lawyers who are African American), Sander infers from his data that race-sensitive admissions policies currently result in fewer, rather than more, African Americans graduating from law school and passing the bar than would occur with race-neutral policies. Sander concludes that attrition would be decreased for African American law students if they were in the middle of their class at a lower-tier law school than if they were—as they presently are—at the bottom of their class in a higher-tier law school.

Sander's "mismatch" explanation has not gone unchallenged. Several scholars have indicated that his analyses rest on some illogical or indefensible assumptions about the data set and about social reality. Ayres & Brooks (2005), for example, point out that Sander assumes that the relationship between initial credentials and law school grades is the same among African Americans as among white students, and they note that his conclusions are valid only if this assumption is valid. Yet, inspection of the data set shows the assumption to be inaccurate. Other researchers warn against cavalierly generalizing from a single cohort. As Chambers et al. (2005) point out, the extent to which race-sensitive policies gave African Americans a boost is linked to the overall applicant pool and its scores. Although estimates have shown that affirmative action doubled the number of African American applicants in some years (including 1991), affirmative action has accounted for only about a 10% increase in other years (e.g., 1997). Ayers & Brooks (2005) and Chambers et al. (2005) also demonstrate that Sander pays insufficient attention to the relationship between the ranking of the school and passage of the bar, thus undermining the credibility of his central conclusion. Finally, Wilkins (2005) notes that Sander's account acknowledges neither the help given to African American graduates of lower-tier law schools by African American graduates of higher-tier

law schools, nor the truth that for African Americans, simply attending law school (without passing the bar) contributes to a considerable boost in annual earnings.

**Benefits of diversity** Diversity achieved through race-sensitive admissions policies has produced several positive effects. Diversity has been shown to result in positive learning outcomes and positive “democracy outcomes” for all students, including an increased ability to take the perspective of others and involvement in political affairs. Longitudinal surveys show that cross-ethnic interactions and participation in diversity courses benefit both whites and people of color (Gurin 2004; Gurin et al. 2002, 2003, 2004). The research demonstrating the salutary effects of diversity for white students as well as for students of color seems to have influenced Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, who wrote the Court’s proaffirmative action opinion in the *Grutter* case (Crosby & Smith 2005). With support from the American Psychological Association (2003), Gurin (2004) was able to rebut attacks from conservative scholars, whose findings fail to support the argument that enrollment diversity improves the educational and social environment at American universities (e.g., Rothman et al. 2003).

A growing body of work from scholars outside of Michigan has substantiated the conclusions drawn by Gurin (2004) and her colleagues. Chang et al. (2004) and Whitla et al. (2003) have shown that ethnic diversity among student bodies elevates the chances that white students will have interaction with students of color. Similarly, the claims about enhanced cognition through diversity have been substantiated by research from other sources as well (Antonio et al. 2004, Tam & Bassett 2004).

The beneficial effects of diversity have been documented less extensively for work settings in comparison with classroom settings. However, studies by economists have shown that firms with vigorous affirmative action plans are as profitable as are other firms (see Crosby 2004, Ch. 3). Although increasing the diversity of workgroups incurs costs, such as increases in initial friction and turnover (see van Knippenberg et al. 2004), laboratory research has demonstrated that heterogeneous groups produce better outcomes than homogeneous groups when participants perceive that they all have something to contribute to the effort (Hewstone et al. 2002).

Bowen & Bok (1998) have articulated an additional advantage of affirmative action: the safeguarding of a well-functioning society. Ethnic minority alumni/ae in their sample made contributions to society in even greater proportion than did their white peers, in terms of professional work as well as in terms of volunteer work. In the Michigan Law School study (Lempert et al. 2000b), ethnic minority alumni/ae also report greater civic engagement than do their white peers. Similarly, studies by the American Dental Association show that significantly more African American dental students than white dental students intend to practice in inner cities (Sinkford & Valachovic 2003). Ethnic minority physicians are disproportionately likely to serve ethnic minority and poor communities (Fryer et al. 2001, Komaromy et al. 1996, Poussaint 1999). Finally, research (e.g., Wright et al. 2001) suggests that

social harmony is promoted when representatives of disadvantaged groups believe that not all avenues to advancement have been closed to them (Lehman 2004). This argument in particular was critical to the thinking of the Supreme Court in the Michigan cases.

**FAIRNESS** Opponents of affirmative action often characterize the policy as being unfair, claiming that it violates a cherished system of meritocracy in the United States by basing selection decisions on demographic characteristics at the expense of ability and achievement (Thernstrom & Thernstrom 1997, Zuriff 2004). Proponents take a markedly different stance. At the most basic level, proponents wonder why affirmative action is singled out for disapproval while the critics remain silent about many other common practices that disrupt meritocracy. Universities, for example, create elaborate rationalizations for why legacy children are three to four times as likely as are other candidates to be granted admission (Guerrero 1997, Rhode 1997). Further, some university athletes have benefited from special admissions criteria, even though evidence has shown that universities may not profit from athletics programs (Bowen & Levin 2003). Similarly, in employment settings, personnel decisions are often based on habit (Crosby et al. 2003) or business exigencies (Brief et al. 1997) rather than on merit.

Proponents of affirmative action generally expand their defense of the policy beyond simply pointing out that the policy is no less fair than is any other. Indeed, some view the policy as more fair than so-called equal opportunity. The fairness argument is based on two basic premises: (a) Sexism and racism persist in American society, and (b) affirmative action presents a more efficient and effective means for reducing discrimination than do the existing alternatives.

Data from multiple branches of the social sciences show that sexism and racism are still significant problems in the United States. Concerning gender, women no longer seem to be at a disadvantage in terms of educational opportunities (Crosby et al. 2003). However, women—and especially mothers—continue to be at a disadvantage relative to men in the labor force (Crosby et al. 2004, Nelson & Bridges 2001).

Concerning race, patterns of interpersonal behavior bespeak continued aversive racism on the part of whites in the United States (Saucier et al. 2005). Reliable differences on the basis of race are also found in educational opportunities, rates of pay, receipt of adequate medical care, and treatment at the hands of the judicial system (Crosby 2004, Ch. 6; Hacker 1995; Hall 2002, 2004; Laycock 2004; Pettigrew 2004; U.S. Dept. Labor 2003). For example, a 2002 study by the Institute of Medicine revealed that ethnic and racial minorities receive poorer medical care than do white people, even after statistical adjustments are made to compensate for pre-existing differences in insurance and income (Stolberg 2002). Tester studies—in which actors of different races are trained to behave in very similar ways when they go to obtain a service or make a purchase—continue to show that people of color receive worse treatment than do white people (Yinger 1993). Experiments reveal that even nominally liberal white college students give

preferential treatment to other whites in campus elections, selecting white candidates over candidates of color when circumstances permit them to do so without having to confront their own prejudices (Dovidio & Gaertner 2002).

Why is affirmative action thought to be superior to other means of eliminating or reducing discrimination? The effectiveness of affirmative action derives from the fact that it is the only means of correcting injustices in the United States that does not rely on the aggrieved parties to come forward on their own behalf. Relying on victims to advocate for themselves is not a good policy, as many factors make it likely that victims will not speak up until they are so angry that potentially damaging conflicts are likely (Crosby & Ropp 2002). For instance, those who suspect that they have been discriminated against on the basis of race or gender may be reluctant to bring attention to their situation for fear of retaliation or because they feel pessimistic about winning a lawsuit (see, e.g., Sechrist et al. 2004). And, more importantly, many who are at a disadvantage on the basis of demographic characteristics do not consciously recognize that problems exist. Extensively documented is the “denial of personal discrimination,” a phenomenon in which members of disadvantaged groups believe that they personally are less disadvantaged than are others in the group (Crosby et al. 2003).

Research has also reliably shown that even very liberal people (who are predisposed to acknowledge discrimination) are unable to detect any but the most blatant discrimination when they encounter gender injustices on a case-by-case basis (e.g., Cordova 1992, Rutte et al. 1994). In contrast, most affirmative action programs enable organizations to detect such biases because they require one or more individuals in an organization to monitor systematically collected data that are then viewed in aggregated displays. Once detected, problems can be corrected quietly before a situation becomes explosive.

One type of bias that has recently received much scrutiny is what sociologist Christopher Jencks (1998) calls “selective system bias.” Selective system bias occurs when there are larger intergroup differences on a gating mechanism (e.g., an entrance examination) than on the behavior being predicted by the gating mechanism (e.g., college grades). Test scores are not necessarily accurate in differentiating among applicants for jobs or for school for a number of reasons (Coleman 2003, Sackett et al. 2001). Sometimes the target behavior (e.g., job performance) depends on a variety of traits so that, even if all the candidates could be ranked from best to worst on any specific trait, an overall ranking might need to combine different traits in complex ways (Taylor 1996). Sometimes the tests are simply imprecise so that applicants within a certain bandwidth of scores are indistinguishable from each other on the target behavior. A study at the University of California, for instance, discovered that differences of 200 points on the SAT II test resulted, on average, in differences of only one third of a grade in students’ overall averages (Geiser & Studley 2001). Thus, students with an SAT II score of 500 might earn an average grade of B- while students with a score of 700 might earn a B average.

In sum, affirmative action can help enhance integration and fairness in education and in employment because it operates as a proactive monitoring system. Such

policies may help ensure that patterns of bias—including selective system bias—are uncovered and corrected (Crosby & Smith 2005).

## Does Affirmative Action have Unintended Negative Consequences?

Critics of affirmative action sometimes worry that it is a medicine that harms its patients. Even when they recognize that discrimination persists and should be addressed, critics maintain that affirmative action undermines its intended beneficiaries by promoting the stereotype that those who benefit from the policy could not succeed on their own (Sowell 2004, Zelnick 1996). Several researchers have illustrated that—under certain conditions (e.g., when the person has no other way of knowing whether or not s/he is qualified)—telling people that they have received positive outcomes simply because of, say, gender, results in self-doubt and uncertainty (e.g., Heilman & Alcott 2001, Heilman & Herlihy 1984, Heilman et al. 1990). The same scholars who document the pernicious effects of blatant privilege also document its boundary conditions: Under many conditions that are likely to exist in the real world outside the laboratory (e.g., when a person knows she is qualified to do work), the undermining effects of “affirmative action privilege” evaporate (for a summary, see Crosby 2004, pp. 146–64; see also Turner et al. 1991).

Nor is there much evidence in nonlaboratory settings of the feared assaults to self-esteem. Several surveys have shown that students of color acknowledge that white professors and students may question the abilities of ethnic minority students, and yet, simultaneously, they appreciate the opportunities afforded them by race-conscious admissions policies (Schmermund et al. 2001, Truax et al. 1997). Minority students attribute awkward situations to racial prejudices rather than to affirmative action (Elizondo & Crosby 2004). Similarly, a national probability sample found no trace of self-doubt among women and people of color who worked for organizations practicing affirmative action (Taylor 1994).

A second unintended consequence of affirmative action, according to critics, is that it functions as a form of reverse discrimination and thus increases intergroup tension (Lynch 1992). When striking down race-sensitive admissions policies at the University of Texas Law School, the Fifth Circuit Appellate Court reasoned that any categorization by ethnic or racial groups was likely to elicit animosity against the group granted preferential treatment by other ethnic groups (including whites). Indeed, one laboratory study has shown that the mere mention of affirmative action is enough to increase students' intolerance against out-group members (Maio & Esses 1998).

Although poorly conceived diversity programs may create resentment and may enlarge antiminority bias, it seems that white students who have the opportunity to interact with the beneficiaries of affirmative action tend to appreciate the contact and tend not to devalue diversity efforts (Bowen & Bok 1998; Lempert et al. 2000a,b). White people who work for affirmative action employers also seem to value race-based remedies for discrimination (Taylor 1995). Evaluations of

employers, and specifically of the fairness of employment practices, are highest among whites who work for diversity-promoting firms (Parker et al. 1997).

## How Can Programs be Maximally Effective?

Research suggests that having an affirmative action policy in place is not always sufficient to help organizations and universities achieve their goals of diversity and merit. Poorly constructed affirmative action programs can cause real harm. Paying attention to proper implementation is important for a number of reasons (Konrad & Linnehan 1995a,b).

Endorsement from the executive level is important to the success of many employment programs, including affirmative action (Jones 1991). The visible commitment of highly ranked officers in an administration helps legitimate affirmative action programs and brings needed resources to implement them (French 2001). In a survey of affirmative action officers, support from the top-level administrators was credited as being the single most important determinant of successful affirmative action programs (Berry 2004). CEOs of newspaper agencies who spoke in their annual reports of social responsibility, and not just of profit, tended to employ more minority reporters than did CEOs who emphasized only profitability (Ankney & Procopio 2003).

Also vital to the success of affirmative action programs is clear and persuasive communication about the goals and the mechanics of affirmative action. Effective official bulletins stress the use of a wide range of relevant and appropriate selection criteria that are considered when making employment and admissions decisions (Cascio et al. 1995, Guinier 2003). Pratkanis & Turner (1996, 1999) note that organizations benefit by making explicit the qualifying criteria for any position and making clear how well qualified all applicants are for the positions. Resistance may be lessened if the message clearly identifies prior and continuing barriers to the use of all talent and shows how aspects of the affirmative action plan dismantle the barriers. Maximally persuasive communications from the organization tend to emphasize how nonbeneficiaries benefit from the affirmative action programs (e.g., by working on the best teams possible rather than on “old boys” teams) and often invoke a sense of social responsibility (Turner & Pratkanis 1994).

Effective communication needs to go in both directions. A recent study of three Arizona police forces highlighted the importance of upward communication (Allen 2003). Successful integration of women and of ethnic minorities depended on honest involvement of those in the front ranks, and on open dialogue between such people and the policymakers. The findings of the Arizona study also underscored a point made some years ago by Hitt & Keats (1984): When new procedures are put into place, mistakes can be made. Rapid correction of the mistakes can help win allies and minimize resentment against newcomers.

One final observation about the successful implementation of affirmative action plans concerns the use of “banding” during the process of candidate evaluation. Test experts and other scholars advocate the use of a band or a range of test scores to determine eligibility rather than a single cutoff point (Kriska 1995, Sackett et al. 2001). Proponents point out that banding can allow inclusion of more diverse pools

of eligible applicants while compromising little in terms of merit or productivity (Kriska 1995).

## ATTITUDES TOWARD AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Since the 1980s, social scientists have studied attitudes toward affirmative action. Some of the studies involve surveys that draw upon national probability samples (e.g., Kinder & Sanders 1996, Sidanius et al. 1992), regional or local probability samples (e.g., Kravitz et al. 2000), samples of professional people in specified organizations (e.g., Konrad & Linnehan 1995a,b), students attending a school (e.g., Chesler & Peet 2002), and samples of convenience (e.g., Sherman et al. 2003). Other studies have taken place in laboratories and have involved systematic variations in the materials presented (e.g., Clayton 1996, Kravitz & Platania 1993). Still other studies have embedded experiments within surveys (e.g., Sniderman & Carmines 1997). To date, there have been several comprehensive reviews of attitude studies (Crosby 2004, Crosby et al. 2001, Kravitz et al. 1997, Taylor et al. 1995).

### What Factors Influence Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action?

Pollsters and social scientists have found attitudes toward affirmative action to vary considerably and somewhat erratically over time (Ewold & Elliott 1997, Schuman et al. 1997, Steeh & Krysan 1996). Given the broadness of the term and confusion over its definition, fluctuations in attitudinal support are perhaps not surprising (Crosby & Cordova 1996). Apparent variability in support for affirmative action may also be a function of variations in the operationalization of attitudes. Studies have widely differed in how they measure attitudes toward affirmative action. In most studies, participants evaluate specific practices, whereas in some (e.g., Elizondo & Crosby 2004) they are asked to evaluate the generic term "affirmative action." Complicating the literature is the finding that, in any one sample, attitudes toward specific aspects of affirmative action may be determined by one set of factors such as fairness concerns, while attitudes toward other aspects or toward affirmative action in general may be determined by another set of factors such as self-interest (Kravitz 1995).

AS A FUNCTION OF THE POLICY Attitudes toward affirmative action vary as a function of how the policy and its practice are portrayed or understood. "Soft" forms of affirmative action, such as outreach programs, are favored over "hard" forms such as programs that use race or gender as a tiebreaking factor in hiring decisions (Kravitz 1995; Kravitz & Klineberg 2000, 2004; Kravitz & Platania 1993; Nosworthy et al. 1995). People who think, or who are told, that affirmative action is a quota system or a system of racial or gender preferences tend to dislike affirmative action more than people who view it differently (Golden et al. 2001, Harris 1992, Kinder & Sanders 1996, Moore 2003, Quinn et al. 2001, Sniderman & Carmines 1997). Meanwhile, participants who have been assured that affirmative

action takes merit into account support the policy more than others (Tougas et al. 1995b). Generally, the fairer a practice is perceived to be, the more highly it is rated (Bobocel et al. 1998).

Aberson (2003) found that both people of color and white people increased their support for affirmative action when justifications were provided for the policy. A few researchers have tracked the effects of different justifications or explanations on people's reactions to affirmative action (e.g., Bobocel & Farrell 1996, Murrell et al. 1994, Taylor-Carter et al. 1995). Among a sample of white citizens, Stoker (1998) found that when policies were explained or justified in terms of discrimination, endorsement declined as racial hostility increased. However, in the absence of explanations, attitudes depended on people's assumptions about the existence of racism rather than on their levels of hostility.

In the past decade, affirmative action in education has provoked more strong sentiment in the nation than has affirmative action in employment. Even though the number of Americans who are directly touched by affirmative action programs in education is only about one-quarter the number of those directly touched by affirmative action in employment, issues of equity and merit in higher education can ignite intense feelings (Downing et al. 2002).

Researchers have also systematically varied the specified target of affirmative action, finding that affirmative action is perceived to be more acceptable for some groups than for others, perhaps because of different judgments of deservingness. Most people express more enthusiasm about affirmative action programs intended to help disabled persons than about those designed to help women or minorities (Kravitz & Platania 1993). People also provide differential support for the consideration of gender compared with race. In a survey of nonstudent adults, Sniderman & Piazza (1993) found that more than 60% of participants supported the government helping women, while 20% supported the government helping blacks. Among white samples in general, support for affirmative action falls when the practice under review was said to benefit blacks (Bobo & Kluegel 1993, Moore 1995, Strolovitch 1998). Clayton (1996) found college students were most averse to categorizations based on group memberships having to do with race, as well as with religion and sexual orientation.

**AS A FUNCTION OF THE PERSON** Attitudes toward affirmative action vary also as a function of characteristics of the attitude-holder. Simple demographic characteristics of attitude-holders (e.g., gender, race, education), as well as general prejudice and political ideology, turn out to be very important.

Quite a number of studies, across a variety of samples including students and workers, have compared women's and men's attitudes toward affirmative action. With some exceptions (e.g., Murrell et al. 1994), the vast majority of studies find that women endorse affirmative action much more strongly than do men (Aberson & Haag 2003, Bell et al. 1997, Golden et al. 2001, Konrad & Linnehan 1995b, Kravitz et al. 2000, Kravitz & Platania 1993, Ozawa et al. 1996, Stout & Buffum 1993, Summers 1995, Truxillo & Bauer 2000).

Similarly, endorsement of affirmative action is generally, but not always (Abersson 2003, Peterson 1994), greater among people of color than among whites (Aguirre et al. 1993, Allen 2003, Arthur et al. 1992, Bell et al. 1997, Bobo & Kluegel 1993, Bobo & Smith 1994, Citrin 1996, Clawson et al. 2003, Fine 1992, Golden et al. 2001, Klineberg & Kravitz 2003, Konrad & Linnehan 1995b, Kravitz et al. 2000, Little et al. 1998, Sigelman & Welch 1991, Stout & Buffum 1993). Compared with other groups, white men tend to be the least supportive of affirmative action (Niemann & Dovidio 1998). In some instances, the reactions of Latinos fall between those of whites and blacks (Klineberg & Kravitz 2003, Kravitz & Platania 1993). The attitudes of Asian Americans have been rarely studied, although one survey found Asian Americans tend to feel ambivalent about the policy (Inkelas 2003).

How does one's level of education factor in? Some researchers (e.g., Golden et al. 2001) have found a positive relationship between education and approval of affirmative action, whereas others (e.g., Tuch & Hughes 1996) have found no relationship. Still others have documented that levels of education mediated the relationship between prejudice and attitudes toward affirmative action such that the association was stronger for college graduates than for others (Federico & Sidanius 2002a,b).

Of special concern to researchers is the extent to which people's attitudes about affirmative action vary as a function of prejudice and political ideology. Across a substantial number of studies, researchers have found that opposition to affirmative action policies and practices is greatest among those who are the most sexist (Tougas et al. 1995a,b; Tougas & Veilleux 1990) and the most racist (Arriola & Cole 2001, Bobo 1998, Bobo & Kluegel 1993, Bobocel et al. 1998, Carmines & Layman 1998, Hayes-James et al. 2001, Hurwitz & Peffley 1998, Lehman & Crano 2002, Little et al. 1998, Mack et al. 2002, Nosworthy et al. 1995, Sawires & Peacock 2000, Sears et al. 1997, Sidanius et al. 1996, Sniderman & Piazza 1993, Stoker 1998, Strolovitch 1998, Tuch & Hughes 1996). At least one major survey has found that modern or covert racism is an even stronger predictor of opposition to affirmative action than is old-fashioned racism (Williams et al. 1999).

Recent research has outlined some contingencies for the associations between prejudice and antiaffirmative action attitudes. Although some older studies focused on differences among groups of participants or associations among variables across an entire sample, the current practice is to look for differential associations among variables within specific subgroups. Carmines & Layman's (1998) survey of Democrats and Republicans is illustrative. Among Democrats, racial attitudes and attitudes toward activist problack policies are strongly associated; among Republicans, they are not. Other data collected by Carmines and Layman show Republicans are less likely to disparage African Americans (even poor African Americans) than to disparage poor people in general.

Other aspects of personality besides prejudice influence affirmative action attitudes. Personal experience with discrimination matters as well (Bell et al. 1997, Fried et al. 2001, Slaughter et al. 2002). In addition, personality variables that are

known to vary with prejudice, like social dominance orientation, have also been found to explain significant amounts of variation in attitudes toward affirmative action (Federico & Sidanius 2000a,b). So have variables that are, arguably, unrelated to gender or racial prejudice, such as ideology (Aberson & Haag 2003, Clawson & Waltenberg 2003), identification with one's racial group (Lowery et al. 2005), conservatism (Sidanius et al. 1996), and a propensity toward individualism (Kemmelmeier 2003, Williams et al. 1999) or toward individualistic explanations (Kluegel 1990). Finally, feelings of "white guilt" about the in-group's privileges or acts of discrimination have been shown to predict support for some, but not all, constructions of affirmative action (Iyer et al. 2003, Swim & Miller 1999).

## What Theories Explain Variations in Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action?

Social psychologists have proposed a number of specific theoretical frameworks to explain variations in attitudes toward affirmative action. Some researchers have directly compared these different explanations (e.g., Aberson 2003, Glaser 1994, Jacobson 1985, Lehman & Crano 2002, Strolovitch 1998). In spirited exchanges, scholars debate whether variations in support for (or opposition to) affirmative action are best explained in terms of symbolic politics, intergroup conflict, self-interest, ideologically delimited cognitions, or principled objections.

Kinder and associates (Hughes 1997, Kinder 1998, Kinder & Sanders 1996, Sears et al. 1997) argue for the symbolic politics point of view, which maintains that reactions to affirmative action are determined more by what race and race relations have come to symbolize for people, and less by what people stand to gain or lose personally from the policy. Bobo and colleagues (Bobo 1998, 2000; Bobo & Kluegel 1993; Bobo et al. 1997; Bobo & Smith 1994; Tolbert & Grummel 2003) have been the most forceful advocates of the view that battles over affirmative action reflect clashes over the interests of different social groups in America. Yet another perspective championed by Sidanius and associates (Federico & Sidanius 2000a,b; Sidanius et al. 1992, 1996) promotes the view that people's ideologies—and specifically their attachment to hierarchy (versus equality)—are the major determinants of reactions to affirmative action.

Although these three perspectives all agree that opposition to affirmative action reflects racial prejudice, they disagree about the larger framework in which to understand the dynamics of the racism. In greater contrast is the approach of Sniderman and his colleagues, who argue that a portion, although certainly not all, of the opposition to affirmative action is based in a commitment to political and economic principles, and is not simply a reflection of racism (Gilens et al. 1998; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman & Carmines 1997; Sniderman & Piazza 1993; Sniderman et al. 1991, 1993).

Examining the debates, Crosby (2004) observed that the moment may have come for accelerating the trend—visible in some of the recent contributions (e.g.,

Dawson 2000, Hughes 1997, Sidanius et al. 1992)—toward integrating the different theoretical approaches. There are several reasons why it no longer makes sense to attempt to explain attitudes toward affirmative action solely in terms of any one theory or approach. First, people may have different reasons for supporting different types of affirmative action (see Iyer et al. 2003). Second, it seems likely that many of the observed relationships among measured variables may be reconceptualized in terms of other measured or unmeasured variables. Thus, for example, one's political worldview (conceived in terms of hierarchy, political principles, or some other dimensions) may determine what one sees as being in the best interest of one's group or one's self and may determine how one judges merit. Is self or group interest then to be seen as the determinant of attitudes, or does one's assessed group interest merely symbolize one's ideology? As for principled objections to affirmative action, it is not difficult to imagine the racist who assumes that people of color are inferior to white people, and who then decries affirmative action as an abrogation of the fair principles of meritocracy for the way in which it allows "inferior" people to gain advantage (Sidanius et al. 2000).

## What Are the Implications for Social Change and Social Stasis?

Close examinations of affirmative action in theory and in practice have enriched our understanding of social change and social stasis. Specifically, applied research on affirmative action has illuminated our understanding of people's behavior in systems of social inequality in three ways: (a) Even when situations contain unfairness, people prefer to see the world as just; (b) this resistance tends to be especially strong among those who benefit more from the status quo; and (c) the change in procedures brought about by affirmative action often appears to be unfair, even when the rules that are being changed are themselves arbitrary.

**PERCEIVING FAIRNESS AND UNFAIRNESS** Research has shown that one basis of opposition to affirmative action is that people do not perceive the need for it, believing that race and gender discrimination are no longer widespread problems (e.g., Kluegel & Smith 1986, Son Hing et al. 2002). Surveys have shown that the poor outcomes of people in underprivileged groups are not seen as indications of racism, sexism, or any other form of prejudice. Rather, they are assumed to result from the inferior qualifications of low-status people (Moss & Tilly 2001, Stark 2004). As Jost & Banaji (1994) have pointed out, Americans are prone to finding ways to justify the status quo. Further, Americans like to see the world as a just place (Lerner 1980). A recent experiment showed that people prefer to be presented with justifications of affirmative action that referenced merit rather than an account that spoke of injustices (Elkins et al. 2003). Even people who express a strong desire to end racial and gender imbalances often give faltering support to affirmative action because of their discomfort with a policy that assumes imperfections in the status quo (Crosby 2004).

Assumptions about social structures and about people's places within the structures are not usually available to conscious thought and thus are not subject to easy correction. For example, a large-scale study of police partners and supervisors found that observers commonly looked for conformity to gender norms when making their evaluations, often without realizing it. Supervisors' evaluations of female officers thus tended to be more inaccurate than their evaluations of male officers (Gerber 2001).

Even when assumptions are brought into conscious awareness, stereotypes resist change. When people encounter members of target groups who violate their (negative) stereotypes, they often maintain the stereotype in the face of this disconfirming evidence by subtyping the group member as someone who is not prototypical of the group (Maurer et al. 1995).

Of course, people differ in their comfort with acknowledging problems with the current system (Jost et al. 2003). People who have a desire to perceive the status quo as a good and unchangeable system often exhibit a "social dominance orientation" (Sidanius & Pratto 1999), which itself is associated with greater opposition to affirmative action (e.g., Federico & Sidanius 2000a,b). Reactions to affirmative action are also conditioned by one's outlook on society (Son Hing et al. 2002). Among students who spontaneously, or through subtle manipulation, believed that discrimination was no longer a feature of society, there was a strong negative association between belief in meritocratic ideals and support for affirmative action. Among students who believed discrimination to persist, the opposite was true (Son Hing et al. 2002).

**PROTECTING PRIVILEGE** Majority group members are less likely than minority group members to perceive discrimination. Studies show that white people (white men in particular) often believe that racial inequality is a thing of the past in American society in general (Wilson 2004) and in the workplace in particular (Mor Barak et al. 1998). Similarly, a survey of professional women found that black and white women were equally likely to perceive gender discrimination in the workplace, but white women were less likely than were black women to perceive race discrimination (Weber & Higginbotham 1997). In a study of faculty, white men were the group most likely to believe that meritocracy operates in academe and also most likely to think that affirmative action "perpetuates a myth of minority and female inferiority" (Witt 1990, p. 86).

One reason that high-status group members may have difficulty acknowledging group inequality is that they wish to preserve the illusion of having legitimately earned all their outcomes. White males seem to have an overdeveloped sense of entitlement, as they often do not acknowledge the structural advantages they have received as a group (Pelham & Hetts 2001). Branscombe (1998) has demonstrated that men become upset when their previously unquestioned or unobserved privilege is exposed. People who rail against "preferential treatment" afforded to ethnic minorities in college admissions plans may turn a blind eye to the preferences that continue to be handed to legacies (Bowen & Rudenstein 2003). As industrial

psychologist Myrtle Bell notes, “My great-great grandmother was a slave. Anyone whose ancestors were not slaves has been given advantages that they didn’t earn” (Crosby 2004, p. 231).

Another difficulty for members of high-status groups is that acknowledgment of group inequality sometimes involves a recognition that members of their own group may have participated in acts of discrimination. Admitting that one’s group has committed transgressions is threatening, as it undermines people’s views of their group as moral and good (Branscombe et al. 2002). Roger Wilkins (2004) illustrates this point in his recollection of a “superb” white male student who had enrolled in a course on race and culture in America. At the end of the course, the student admitted that it had been the hardest course he had taken because he “learned that [his] two heroes—[his] parents—are racists” (p. 52). In the same vein, Iyer et al. (2003, Study 2) showed that European American students were more reluctant to believe that racial discrimination was a problem when attention was drawn to their racial group’s responsibility for the transgressions than when their attention was directed toward the victims. Similarly, evidence suggests that framing inequality in terms of the advantages bestowed to whites is more threatening to whites than inequality framed in terms of the disadvantages suffered by blacks (Lowery et al. 2005).

**UNDERSTANDING CHANGE** One study of an organization that had implemented affirmative action to correct for known discriminatory practices uncovered an interesting phenomenon: People experience a change in procedures or rules as being unfair even when they recognized that the original rules were arbitrary or imbalanced. Follow-up experiments in the laboratory confirmed that those who benefited under one set of arbitrary rules felt sorely cheated when the rules were changed (Crosby & Franco 2003). Organizations that discover that their practices are faulty thus face a conundrum: Either they can persist with unfair practices or they can change the practices. To the extent that employees experience the change as coming “in the middle of the game,” they will perceive it as a violation of procedural justice and react negatively.

## IN SUM

Psychologists have joined other scholars across the social sciences, education, and the law in seeking to understand affirmative action and to determine the most beneficial ways to implement it. Research shows that many different factors influence people’s reactions to affirmative action, including characteristics of the program and characteristics of the person. Research also shows that the persistence of prejudice and of discrimination is one of the major reasons why the policy is still needed today and is likely to be needed for decades to come. One can expect that the next few years will bring continued careful study of and lively debate over affirmative action and its role in promoting fairness and effectiveness across diverse settings.

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