

## **Affirmative Action's Contradictory Consequences**

**Madeline E. Heilman**

*New York University*

*This comment raises questions about whether affirmative action has actually moved us closer to the objective of creating a more equal workplace. It explores some of the potential psychological costs of affirmative action—costs that paradoxically may undermine its objectives—and their implications for achieving the goal of workplace equality.*

The potentially deleterious consequences of affirmative action for organizations and the people who work in them have been amply documented (see Heilman, 1994, for a review). The root of these negative consequences is the widespread belief that affirmative action entails preferential selection and treatment on the basis of group membership (Kravitz & Platanina, 1993). The research indicates that when individuals have reason to discount the role of merit criteria in selection, when the other is perceived to be benefited not because of what he or she merits but because of what social group he/she belongs to, (1) the selected others can become tainted with a stigma of incompetence, (2) the nonbeneficiaries can feel cheated and become resentful and demotivated, and (3) the beneficiaries themselves can suffer in their self-evaluations and work attitudes and behavior. Each of these are discussed briefly below.

### **Three Deleterious Consequences of Affirmative Action**

#### *The Stigma of Incompetence*

Results of several research investigations give credence to the idea that affirmative action can stigmatize its intended beneficiaries, causing inferences of

---

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Prof. Madeline E. Heilman, Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, Rm. 576, New York, NY 10003. Electronic mail should be sent via Internet to mh@xp.psych.nyu.edu.

incompetence. Thus, Garcia, Erskine, Hawn, and Casmay (1981) demonstrated that more unfavorable evaluations were made about the qualifications of minority applicants to a graduate school program when commitment to affirmative action was highlighted, and Jacobson and Koch (1977) demonstrated that a woman's leadership performance was devalued when she was appointed leader solely on the basis of her sex. In a series of investigations, my colleagues and I built upon this work (Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992). Inferences of incompetence were found to result from association with affirmative action regardless of whether research participants doing the evaluations were male or female, or whether they were students or working people. These inferences were evidenced whether the target beneficiary was a woman or a member of a racial minority, or whether the association with affirmative action efforts was explicitly communicated or only assumed. Additional research (Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, in press) has demonstrated the affirmative action stigma of incompetence to be very potent and to prevail even after on-the-job information is available; short of explicit and unequivocal evidence of performance effectiveness, it appears to dominate competence judgments.

### *Reactions of Those Who Feel Unfairly Bypassed*

There is reason to believe, based on evidence in the literature (e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 1982; Nacoste, 1987, 1990), as well as reports in the public press (e.g., Bremilow, 1992; Henry, 1991), that by explicitly taking group membership of women and minorities into account and giving it favored consideration in decision making, those who traditionally would have been selected for jobs often feel they have been unfairly bypassed. The negative consequences of this experience of injustice have been documented in a recent study (Heilman, McCullough, & Gilbert, 1996). When the male subjects saw themselves as more (or even equally) deserving of a desired task role than the preferentially selected female beneficiary, there were costs in terms of motivation, negative affect, and work attitudes. And what is particularly striking about these results is the finding that this occurred even without information establishing deservingness; when preferential selection occurred, male nonbeneficiaries *assumed* themselves to be the more qualified and deserving of the desired task role. It also should be noted that all participants who were exposed to a preferential rather than a merit-based selection procedure demonstrated a greater reluctance to engage in helping behavior than those who were not.

### *Beneficiaries' Self Views of Competence*

Early research by Nacoste (1985), using a role playing procedure, suggested that affirmative action may in fact harm those it was designed to benefit. Subse-

quent investigations, conducted together with several of my colleagues, systematically explored this issue. A series of laboratory experiments during which subjects actually were selected for a desired task role (leader) either on the basis of merit or preferentially on the basis of their sex strongly supported the idea that preferential selection can trigger negative self-regard for women beneficiaries; they were found to rate their performance more negatively, to view themselves as more deficient in leadership ability, and to be more eager to relinquish their desirable leadership role (Heilman, Repper, & Simon, 1987; Heilman, Lucas, & Kaplow, 1990). The absence of similar findings for men, and results of an investigation directly varying male and female subjects' degree of confidence in their ability to do the task (Heilman et al., 1990), indicated that this negativity was most likely to occur when individuals were uncertain about their competence, suggesting that those in today's organizations whose selection breaks new ground are particularly vulnerable to adverse consequences. Extending those ideas, another study (Heilman, Rivero, & Brett, 1991) looked beyond self-perceptions and attitudes to actual work-related behavior and demonstrated the tendency of preferentially selected women subjects to shy away from demanding tasks, choosing those that are less challenging and complex. Findings of harm to beneficiaries of affirmative action also had been reported by other investigators (Major, Feinstein, & Crocker, 1994; Turner, Pratkanis & Hardaway, 1991).

### **The Costs of Affirmative Action's Deleterious Consequences**

How important are these potentially negative consequences of affirmative action when measured against its evident success in employment participation rates? The answer is, resoundingly, "very important." Despite its potential limitations on generalization to all affirmative action situations (it has primarily focused on women beneficiaries, been conducted in the laboratory, and involved "strong" forms of affirmative action in which group membership was given heavy weight in the selection decision), the consistent pattern of results found in my research, together with the corroborating findings of others using different samples and methods, compel serious questions about the ultimate effectiveness of affirmative action as a policy. These questions concern not only its potentially detrimental psychological consequences but also the likelihood of it achieving its original objective—the attainment of equality in the workplace.

The research findings suggest that, as currently construed, affirmative action policies can thwart rather than promote workplace equality. The stigma associated with affirmative action, as well as the increased salience of social categories produced by the very idea of affirmative action, are apt to fuel rather than debunk stereotypical thinking and prejudiced attitudes. Denying individuals the satisfaction and pride in knowing they have achieved something on their own merits can decrease their self-efficacy, fostering self-views of inferiority. The

anger and/or frustration resulting from feeling unfairly bypassed for employment opportunities can aggravate workplace tensions and intergroup hostilities. Therefore, despite its apparent success in expanding employment opportunities for women and minorities, affirmative action has not necessarily moved us closer to the objective of creating a more equal workplace or a more equal society.

Is this a function of affirmative action as a concept or of affirmative action as it currently is implemented? Might not affirmative action be more successful in reaching all of its original objectives if it were enacted differently in the work setting? Although scholars have begun to address these questions (see, for example, Pratkanis & Turner, this issue), the answers are not yet clear. What is clear, however, is that the adverse psychological consequences of affirmative action rest on perceptions not on objective reality. Thus, combatting them requires challenging and redefining current beliefs and assumptions about what, exactly, affirmative action is and what it means in actual practice. As long as it is thought to bring women and minorities into the organizational mainstream through preferential procedures based predominantly on group membership, it seems likely to continue to perpetuate the very conditions that gave rise to the problems it was designed to resolve.

So, where does this leave us? There is a need to maintain efforts to combat discrimination and promote equal opportunity in the workplace; without such efforts sexism and racism, unbridled, will no doubt poison the environment of work organizations even more than they currently do. Nonetheless, the message imparted so repeatedly by research results must be heeded: simply providing women and minorities access to jobs traditionally reserved for White men in our society does not necessarily further their cause. Access does not imply acceptance, and access does not guarantee advancement. On the contrary, affirmative action, unless it ceases to be associated with an absence of quality standards, seems as much a part of the problem as a part of the remedy.

## References

- Bremilow, P. (1992, May 25). Spiral of silence. *Forbes*, pp. 76-77.
- Garcia, L. T., Erskine, N., Hawn, K., & Casmay, S. R. (1981). The effect of affirmative action on attributions about minority group members. *Journal of Personality*, 49, 427-437.
- Heilman, M. E. (1994). Affirmative action: Some unintended consequences for working women. In B. Staw & L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (pp. 125-169). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Heilman, M. E., Block, C. J., & Lucas, J. A. (1992). Presumed incompetent? Stigmatization and affirmative action efforts. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 77, 536-544.
- Heilman, M. E., Block, C., & Stathatos, P. (in press). The affirmative action stigma of incompetence: Effects of performance information. *Academy of Management Journal*.
- Heilman, M. E., Lucas, J. A., & Kaplow, S. R. (1990). Self-derogating consequences of preferential selection: The moderating role of initial self-confidence. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Process*, 46, 202-216.
- Heilman, M. E., McCullough, W. F., & Gilbert, D. (1996). The other side of affirmative action:

- Reactions of non-beneficiaries to sex-based preferential selection. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81, 346-357.
- Heilman, M. E., Rivero, J. C., & Brett, J. F. (1991). Skirting the competence issue: Effects of sex-based preferential selection on task choices of women and men. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 76, 99-105.
- Heilman, M. E., Simon, M. C., & Repper, D. P. (1987). Intentionally favored, unintentionally harmed?: The impact of gender-based preferential selection on self-perceptions and self-evaluations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 72, 62-68.
- Henry, W. A., III (1991, Sept. 30). What price preference? *Time*, pp. 30-31.
- Jacobson, M. B., & Koch, W. (1977). Women as leaders: Performance evaluation as a function of method of leader selection. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 20, 149-157.
- Kleugel, J. R., & Smith, E. R. (1982). White's beliefs about black's opportunity. *American Sociological Review*, 47, 518-532.
- Kravitz, D., & Platania, J. (1993). Attitudes and beliefs about affirmative action: Effects of target and of respondent sex and ethnicity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78, 928-938.
- Major, B., Feinstein, J., & Crocker, J. (1994). Attributional ambiguity of affirmative action. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 15, 113-141.
- Nacoste, R. W. (1985). Selection procedure and responses to affirmative action: The case of favorable treatment. *Law and Human Behavior*, 9, 225-242.
- Nacoste, R. W. (1987). But do they care about fairness? The dynamics of preferential treatment and minority interest. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 8, 117-191.
- Nacoste, R. W. (1990). Sources of stigma: Analyzing the psychology of affirmative action. *Law and Policy*, 12, 175-195.
- Turner, M. E., Pratkanis, A. R., & Hardaway, T. J. (1991). Sex differences in reactions to preferential selection: Towards a model of preferential selection as help. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 6, 797-814.

MADELINE E. HEILMAN is Professor of Psychology at New York University, where she is the Coordinator of the Industrial/Organizational Psychology program. After receiving her Ph.D. in social psychology from Columbia University in 1972, she spent eight years as a member of the faculty at Yale's School of Organization and Management. Her areas of specialty are social and organizational psychology, and she is on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Her research has focused on sex bias in work settings, the dynamics of stereotyping, and the unintended consequences of preferential selection processes.

Copyright of Journal of Social Issues is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.