

## **Affirmative Reaction: The Influence of Type of Justification on Nonbeneficiary Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action Plans in Higher Education**

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*It is popularly believed that justifying an affirmative action plan (AAP) through emphasizing the advantages that diverse students can bring to a college campus will increase nonbeneficiary support for the program. However, there has been little empirical support for this proposition, perhaps because previous research has not directly articulated to participants the value of a diverse student body. As such, the current study sought to determine how the explicit framing of an AAP influences subsequent reactions. Both quantitative and qualitative data from 216 White undergraduate participants revealed that the utilitarianism justification that highlighted the benefits of the AAP to both minority and majority students, was the most effective means of increasing support for the plan.*

“Long before Einstein told us that matter is energy, Machiavelli and Hobbes and other modern political philosophers defined man as a lump of matter whose most politically relevant attribute is a form of energy called ‘self-interestedness.’ This was not a portrait of man ‘warts and all.’ It was all wart” (Will, 1983, p. 30).

For centuries, scholars such as Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War*; 431 B.C./1972), Niccolo Machiavelli (*The Prince*; 1513/1999), Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*; 1651/1960), and Bernard Mandeville (*The Fable of the Bees*; 1714/1988) have argued that humans are, at base, egoists who are motivated to maximize their own advantages while remaining indifferent to the needs of others. Although these views historically received much support, philosopher Adam Smith instead

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posited that self-interest is not necessarily “all wart” and often can benefit the common good (Smith, 1776). Smith’s idea is the basis of modern market economics, and his notion of conditional egoism implied that egoism and altruism are not necessarily two ends of a continuum, but can exist simultaneously. As he noted in his seminal book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), “We address ourselves, not to [others’] humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages” (vol. 1, bk. 1, chap. 2).

Now, more than 225 years later, Smith’s ideas continue to influence modern debates over public policy. For instance, one of the most contentious topics of the past several decades has been over the perceived benefits and impairments of affirmative action on different demographic groups. Generally speaking, nonbeneficiaries of affirmative action are unsupportive of affirmative action plans (AAPs) because they feel it is against their self-interest (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993). However, a more recent line of research has shown that a diverse student body can directly benefit all students through increasing their creativity, flexibility, interpersonal skills, leadership abilities, prosocial behavior, and ability and desire to interact with diverse others (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gurin, 1999; Milem, 2002; Perloff & Bryant, 2000). In effect, a diverse student body can be a crucial tool in helping students prepare for an increasingly global and heterogeneous society (Johnston & Packer, 1987).

Synthesizing this new research with Smith’s historical idea of conditional egoism results in the following question: If nonbeneficiaries of affirmative action can be made to see how having a diverse student body is in their own self-interest, will they be more supportive of different affirmative action plans? It is a proposition that has generally been supported by the popular press (e.g., Arredondo, 1996), but the idea has yet to be thoroughly and empirically tested. Although some research has attempted to answer this question, it has either confounded the type of AAP with the justification (Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drou, 1994) or has assumed that people already recognize the value of diversity—an unsubstantiated assumption that has been disputed by others (e.g., Griggs & Louw, 1995). As such, the purpose of the present study is to determine if and to what extent informing nonbeneficiaries of the indirect benefits they could receive from an AAP positively influences their attitudes toward the plan.

### Changing Affirmative Action Attitudes

Since its inception, affirmative action has been a highly charged public issue, as nonbeneficiaries often claim that affirmative action leads to the admission of unqualified applicants, and thus, violates principles of fairness (Clayton & Tangri, 1989; Hegtvædt & Cook, 2001). However, because affirmative action is often perceived as a necessary means to achieve true equality and equal opportunity (Nacoste, 1987a), a central question is how to make negative attitudes toward affirmative action and its beneficiaries more positive.

**Table 1.** Composite Variables and Factor Loadings

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Perceived fairness of the AAP (item and factor loading)	
Does this affirmative action plan treat all concerned parties fairly? (.72)	
Do you think that the procedures used to select applicants are fair? (.71)	
Will this AAP have a negative effect on qualified Whites getting selected? (.69)	
In general, is this AAP fair? (.69)	
How do you think white students will feel toward the AAP? (.63)	
Do you think that the outcomes that will result from this AAP are fair? (.60)	
Would you want to attend a university with this affirmative action plan? (.49)	
Beneficial outcomes of the AAP (item and loading)	
Will the AAP benefit you indirectly? (.78)	
Will this AAP benefit Rice? (.65)	
Do you think this AAP will be effective at Rice? (.64)	
Is Rice's justification of why they are implementing AAP adequate? (.59)	
Are the goals of this affirmative action plan good? (.59)	
How likely are you to say positive things about the AAP to friends/family? (.55)	
How do you feel toward Rice after learning about the AAP? (.53)	
How do you feel toward this AAP? (.52)	
Will the AAP benefit you directly? (.47)	
Intended resistance of the AAP (item and loading)	
How likely are you to resist the AAP? (-.80)	
How likely are you to try to convince others that the AAP is unfair? (-.77)	
How likely are you to complain to fellow students about the AAP? (-.71)	
Will this AAP result in unqualified students being accepted at Rice? (-.61)	

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*Providing Information About the AAP*

One possibility is to make employees aware of the details surrounding the organization's AAP (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000). If information about the details of an AAP is not provided, then people often assume that the beneficiary received strong preferential treatment in the selection process and subsequently is unqualified (Heilman & Blader, 2001). Despite the widespread misperceptions about what AAPs entail, it seems that these erroneous convictions and negative affirmative action schemas are more powerful than the actual reality of affirmative action (Barnes-Nacoste, 1994). Others have also argued, as we do, that because the public holds many inaccurate beliefs, educating them about the actual details of AAPs will ameliorate negative attitudes toward them (Doverspike, Taylor, & Arthur, 2000; Eberhardt & Fiske, 1994).

For example, although hard "quotas" are illegal (except in cases of extremely egregious past discrimination; Guttman, 1993), many people inaccurately believe that quotas to select a prespecified number of (typically unqualified) women and minorities are the main component of a "typical" AAP (Kravitz & Klineberg, 2000). In actuality, there are many types of AAP that are more frequently used. All programs vary along a continuum with one end placing emphasis exclusively on universalistic characteristics (e.g., merit) in selection decisions and the other end taking only particularistic traits (e.g., race, gender, physical disability) into account in the decision process (Nacoste, 1987b).

The most commonly used types of AAPs are *compensatory procedures* (e.g., increased recruiting, training, mentoring, and career guidance for targeted groups). In this program, provisions are made to help protected groups, but no weight is ultimately given to particularistic traits in selection decisions (Kravitz et al., 1997). Another type of AAP involves *proportional selection quotas*, with target groups being selected in direct proportion to that particular group's number of qualified applicants in the pool. It is important to note that although this plan involves quotas per se, it involves selecting qualified applicants and not unqualified ones, in contrast to the popular notion of "affirmative action quotas" generally assumed by the public (Kravitz, 1995). Proportional selection quotas equally involve both particularistic and universalistic traits in the decision-making process. A final type of AAP is known as *weak preferential treatment*. In this "tiebreak" system, protected groups are given preferential treatment only when they are as qualified as a majority group member. More so than in any of the other AAPs, particularistic characteristics are given a significant amount of weight in weak preferential treatment programs.

Previous research has shown that people's acceptance of an affirmative action plan is a direct function of the amount of emphasis placed on particularistic factors such as race and gender (Nacoste, 1985, 1987b). Specifically, the more weight given to these characteristics in hiring and promotion decisions, the more people have negative reactions to the AAP (Kravitz, 1995). There are a number of possible explanations for this pattern, most notably that people believe affirmative action violates norms of fairness, and that it works against their self-interest (Kravitz et al., 1997). Therefore, based on previous research, we predict that there will be a linear trend related to the type of AAP such that participants will have less positive reactions to the AAP as more emphasis is placed on race in the selection process (Hypothesis 1).

### *The Influence of Justifications*

Another potential way to change existing affirmative action attitudes is through the use of framing and justification (Goldstein & Weber, 1997; Shafir, Simonson, & Tversky, 1997). Generally speaking, a frame is "a psychological device that offers a perspective and manipulates salience in order to influence subsequent judgment" (Cialdini & Rhoads, 1997). Because people are influenced by changes in perspective, their perception of the desirability of options changes depending on the frame (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1986).

Within the realm of racial attitudes, the framing of a question used to assess opinions about affirmative action can dramatically influence people's answers, even though people typically have very strong opinions about racial issues (Fletcher & Chalmers, 1991). For instance, Whites support the idea of affirmative action when it is framed as providing equal opportunity and as helping minorities get

ahead (Kluegel & Smith, 1983), yet they are opposed to affirmative action when framed as having negative consequences for Whites and men (Bell, Harrison, & McLaughlin, 2000). Other research has found that Whites oppose affirmative action more when it is framed as “discriminating against Whites” than when it is framed as “giving Blacks advantages they haven’t earned,” as the first frame highlights their potential losses (Fine, 1992). Other research has shown that pro- and anti-affirmative action frames can dramatically influence attitudes (Bell et al., 2000; Taylor-Carter, Doverspike, & Alexander, 1995).

After universities have developed and implemented AAPs, an important final step is often communicating, framing, and justifying the purpose and details of the plan (Kravitz et al., 1997; Marino, 1980). Consequently, many studies have shown that giving a rationale for an AAP can help increase acceptance of the program (Doverspike et al., 2000; Heilman, McCullough, & Gilbert, 1996; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Murrell et al., 1994; Tyler & Bies, 1990). When framing the AAP, a *compensation* justification is typically used when a rationale is provided for the plan. This frame emphasizes the proverbial glass ceiling that minorities face in admissions procedures, the need to redress past discrimination, and the benefits that protected groups will receive from the AAP (e.g., increased satisfaction, networks, and career opportunities). Although giving a compensation frame is typically more effective than no justification in improving White’s attitudes toward affirmative action, it only outlines how the program will positively affect the beneficiaries. However, in order for an AAP to be successful, universities clearly must have the support of nonbeneficiaries who might initially have negative attitudes toward the policy (Bobocel & Farrell, 1996). To this extent, a compensation justification may not be effective enough to change White employees’ preexisting attitudes. As Doverspike et al. (2000, p. 182) explain:

“Emphasizing the benefits of the policy rather than focusing on its potentially negative impact on majority group members may aid acceptance of affirmative action. It is probably the case that seeking acceptance for affirmative action through an appeal based on minority group needs alone will not successfully eradicate resistance especially when . . . justice rules have been violated.”

A more recent type of AAP framing that focuses on majority group interests is an *instrumental* justification (Kravitz et al., 1997). This frame justifies affirmative action by emphasizing the advantage that “affirmative diversity” (Jones, 1994) can have on the entire student body. As described earlier, a recent line of research has explored the varied benefits that diverse students can bring to a college campus. For instance, universities with a heterogeneous composition have students who are more creative, have better interpersonal skills and leadership abilities, perform more volunteer work, and are better prepared and more motivated to interact with diverse others in the future (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gurin, 1999; Milem, 2002; Perloff & Bryant, 2000). Because people are more acceptive of affirmative action if they believe it is associated with enhanced performance (Kravitz et al., 2000),

an instrumental justification might be effective in gaining support for affirmative action.

Highlighting the value of a diverse student body might be particularly effective in changing nonbeneficiaries' attitudes because it shows Whites how a racially diverse campus is in their own self-interest. Consequently, even students who might initially be opposed to affirmative action might support it if they believe they will benefit from its implementation (Arredondo, 1996; Doverspike et al., 2000; Spears, 1996; Tyler & Dawes, 1993). Because making a message self-relevant is one powerful way to stimulate attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), an instrumental justification may be the most influential method of encouraging nonbeneficiary support for an organization's AAP.

Conventional wisdom tells us that diverse students "bring with them. . .not merely different amounts of the same things, but also different kinds of things that make them valuable" (Clayton & Tangri, 1989, p. 180). By showing Whites that interactions with minorities can enrich their educational experience (Combs, 1986), these nonbeneficiaries should react more favorably to AAPs. Therefore, if Whites reconceptualize race as a valid "input," then their procedural justice norms (i.e., people's insistence that the processes used in selection procedures be fair) should be satisfied. Consequently, if nonbeneficiaries believe that procedural fairness judgments are met and that the process of selection is just and equitable, they should be more willing to accept affirmative action (Dovidio, Mann, & Gaertner, 1989).

Although many researchers have speculated that framing affirmative action as enhancing diversity will increase nonbeneficiary support for its policies through eliciting self-interest (e.g., Arredondo, 1996; Doverspike et al., 2000; Thomas, 1990), few researchers have directly tested this theory. Those studies that have examined the effects of compensation and instrumental justifications have generally found that there is no difference between the justifications on measures of attitude change (Bobocel & Farrell, 1996; Matheson, Echenberg, Taylor, Rivers, & Chow, 1994; Murrell et al., 1994). However, none of these studies explicitly described how a diverse student body is beneficial and how it can be in the self-interest of nonbeneficiaries. That is, they assumed that participants already understood the value of diversity, which is most likely a false assumption (Griggs & Louw, 1995). However, by thoroughly explaining the benefits of affirmative action to nonbeneficiaries should make the message more concrete, personal, and meaningful (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Pratkanis & Aaronson, 2000).

Moreover, a message that combines elements of both compensation and instrumental justifications should be exceptionally effective at gaining acceptance of an AAP, as this frame appeals both to people's egoistic desire to maximize their own self-interest and altruistic desire to help others. We refer to this type of justification as a *utilitarianism* justification, in the vein of the Utilitarianists (e.g., John Stuart Mill, 1863) who argue that humans are motivated by the greatest good of

the greatest number and that human behavior “is right if it tends to maximize happiness, not only that of the agent but also of everyone affected” (“Utilitarianism,” 2003).

As such, we predict an omnibus main effect of type of justification on participants’ reactions to affirmative action (Hypothesis 2). More specifically, it is predicted that an instrumental justification (Hypothesis 2a) or especially a utilitarianism justification (Hypothesis 2b) will result in more favorable attitudes toward AAPs than a control condition that offers no justification for the AAP. Conversely, it is predicted that a compensation justification that does not relate to participants’ self-interest will not be enough to elicit more favorable attitudes toward the AAP than when the control with no justification is given (Hypothesis 2c).

Furthermore, based on previous research (e.g., Kravitz, 1995; Murrell et al., 1994), we believe that there will be an interaction between the type of AAP and type of justification (Hypothesis 3) on reactions to the plan. Specifically, we predict that the utilitarianism justification will result in the most favorable attitudes and will be the “flattest” line across the different AAPs (i.e., type of AAP will not influence attitudes in this condition because of the persuasiveness of the utilitarianism justification). The instrumental justification should result in a line that is slightly steeper (i.e., participants will react positively to increased recruitment but slightly less positively to proportional selections quotas and even less positively to weak preferential treatment). The condition in which no justification is given should elicit a slope even steeper than in the previous two conditions, and similar to that found in Kravitz (1995) in the absence of any kind of framing. Finally, the compensation justification condition should elicit more favorable attitudes than the no justification condition with the first two types of AAPs. However, it is predicted that there will actually be a “backlash” effect when this justification is used to justify the weak preferential treatment, as previous research finds that negative reactions to affirmative action are strongest when “its benefits to groups associated with negative feelings and beliefs (e.g., Blacks) are emphasized *and* the procedures. . . can be perceived of as unfair (e.g., preferential treatment)” (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996, p. 63).

Based on previous research, we also anticipate that certain characteristics of the respondents will affect their reactions to affirmative action. Specifically, we predict that women will have more favorable attitudes toward AAPs than will men (Hypothesis 4) based on a sense of cooperative self-interest (i.e., the idea that they may indirectly benefit from programs intended to help other disenfranchised groups; Kluegel & Smith, 1983). This pattern may also occur because women may also favor equality and procedural justice in selection decisions, whereas men prefer equity and distributive justice (Doverspike et al., 2000). These differential approaches to fairness in the selection process would consequently result in women being more concerned with macrojustice and the rights of disadvantaged groups

and men being focused on microjustice and the rights of individuals (Clayton & Tangri, 1989).

Furthermore, a three-way interaction between type of AAP, type of justification, and participant gender is expected (Hypothesis 5) similar to the two-way interaction predicted above. Specifically, based on macrojustice and communal gender stereotypes of women as concerned with others (Eagly & Steffen, 1984), female participants should react positively to all three types of AAPs, especially when exposed to a compensation or utilitarianism frame; conversely, based on microjustice and agentic stereotypes of men as concerned with self-promotion (Eagly & Steffen, 1984), male participants should react negatively to all three types of AAPs (especially the weak preferential treatment), and this negativity should be heightened when exposed to a compensation justification or when given no justification.

On a more qualitative level, it is believed that participants' open-ended writing about their reaction to the AAP will differ depending on the justification given for the AAP (Hypothesis 6). As such, the Linguistic Inquiry and Word count program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001) can be used to explore participants' emotional processes as revealed through their writing. Because the utilitarianism justification is expected to elicit the most positive feelings and emotions, it is predicted that participants exposed to a utilitarianism justification will use a higher percentage of general affective words and positive affective words in their open-ended writing than those exposed to a compensation justification (Hypothesis 6a), an instrumental justification (Hypothesis 6b), or no justification (Hypothesis 6c).

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 216 White undergraduate students (110 men, 106 women) at a small, private southern university volunteered to participate in this study, in exchange for partial course credit. Participants had a mean age of 19.5 years ( $SD = 1.23$ ) and ranged from 17 to 24 years.

### *Materials*

Each participant read one of 12 different hypothetical memoranda describing their university's new AAP and the justification for the program. The descriptions of the three types of AAPs were consistent with definitions used in previous studies (e.g., Kravitz, 1995). To minimize error variance, a pilot test was conducted to match the compensation, instrumental, and utilitarianism justifications on five critical dimensions (congruent with the procedure used by Taylor-Carter et al., 1995). Specifically, 15 participants read ten compensation and ten instrumental

justifications and then rated each sentence on six 7-point Likert-type scales: complexity (easy to understand-hard to understand), familiarity (familiar-unfamiliar), subjectivity (factual-subjective), persuasiveness (convincing-unconvincing), polarity (positive-negative), and beneficiary (benefits only minorities-benefits me).

After analyzing the pilot data, six compensation justifications and six instrumental justifications were matched on these dimensions (except for the beneficiary dimension) and compiled to form their respective conditions (see Appendix A for the opening paragraph used in the memo and the justifications used in the three experimental justification conditions). The utilitarianism condition was formed by matching three of the instrumental justifications with three of the compensation justifications on the dimensions noted above and then compiling the six justifications. All of the justifications were obtained from empirical and popular articles and books that document the benefits of affirmative action to beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gurin, 1999; Perloff & Bryant, 2000).

### *Questionnaire*

Each memo was followed by 20 questions designed to assess participants' reactions to the AAP. These 20 items were all found to be important in previous research that studied attitudes toward affirmative action (e.g., Bell, 1996; Belliveau, 1996; Kravitz, 1995; Kravitz et al., 2000; Taylor-Carter et al., 1995). Because it might be argued that frame research merely reflects participants' reactions to demand cues and not true attitude change, measures of intention to support or resist the AAP were included as well (as intention is often a highly significant predictor of behavior; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Specifically, participants were asked to rate on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*) seventeen different aspects of their attitudes toward the AAP. These items were factor analyzed using a principle components exploratory factor analysis with a varimax rotation, which resulted in three composite variables: *the fairness of the AAP* (e.g., "Do you think that the outcomes that will result from this affirmative action plan are fair?"; Cronbach's alpha = .90), *the perceived beneficial outcomes of the AAP* (e.g., "Do you think this affirmative action plan will be effective at this school?"; Cronbach's alpha = .86), and *their anticipated resistance to the AAP* (e.g., "How likely are you to complain to fellow students about this affirmative action plan?"; Cronbach's alpha = .82).

Additionally, to reduce common method bias, participants had the opportunity to record their attitudes and opinions about affirmative action (the qualitative data were coded by the Linguistic Inquiry and Word count program [LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2001]). Then, after completing the response sheet, participants recorded their answers to demographic questions (e.g., race, gender, age).

### *Design and Procedure*

A 4 (Justification: Compensation, Instrumental, Utilitarianism, or No Explanation)  $\times$  3 (Type of AAP: Weak Preferential Treatment, Proportional Selection, Increased Recruiting)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender: Male or Female) between-subjects design was used to explore the effect of justification and type of AAP on nonbeneficiaries' reactions to affirmative action. After agreeing to complete the questionnaire that was introduced as an investigation of "selection procedures in higher education," participants first read a memorandum purportedly distributed at their university by the school's affirmative action committee and then made judgments in response to the memo (having the memo being written by the university's Affirmative Action Committee should have enhanced the credibility of the message, the perceived administrative support of AAP, and the persuasiveness of the message; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Upon completing the questionnaire, participants received a debriefing sheet reminding them that the memo was hypothetical. Then, the experimenter thanked them for their participation and dismissed them.

### **Results**

The data were analyzed using a 4 (Justification: Compensation, Instrumental, Utilitarianism, or No Explanation)  $\times$  3 (Type of AAP: Weak Preferential Treatment, Proportional Selection, Increased Recruiting)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender: Male or Female) between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). As predicted by Hypotheses 1 and 2, there was a main effect of type of AAP ( $F(2, 192) = 6.49, p = .0001; \eta^2 = .093$ ) and of type of justification,  $F(3, 192) = 2.03, p = .034; \eta^2 = .031$ . However, contrary to Hypotheses 3 there was not a two-way interaction between type of AAP and justification,  $F(6, 192) = .58, p = .80; \eta^2 = .022$ . Consistent with Hypothesis 4, there was a main effect of gender,  $F(1, 192) = 6.35, p = .0001; \eta^2 = .091$ . However, contrary to Hypothesis 5, there was not a three-way interaction between type of AAP, justification, and gender,  $F(6, 192) = 1.01, p = .44; \eta^2 = .031$ . To further examine the significant main effects, the data were analyzed using univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests and planned contrasts.

#### *Type of AAP*

As predicted in Hypothesis 1, there was a main effect of type of AAP on perceived fairness of the AAP,  $F(2, 192) = 15.92, p = .0001, \eta^2 = .14$ . A planned linear contrast revealed that the more weight given to race in the selection process, the less participants believed that the AAP was fair ( $p = .0001$ ). That is, participants felt that increased recruiting of minority applicants was somewhat fair ( $M = 4.26, SD = 1.37$ ), that proportional selection quotas were somewhat unfair ( $M = 3.63, SD = 1.20$ ), and that weak preferential treatment was very unfair ( $M = 3.03,$

$SD = 1.09$ ). A similar main effect of type of AAP for the perceived beneficial outcomes of the AAP was obtained,  $F(2, 192) = 4.35, p = .014, \eta^2 = .043$ . There was a linear trend in the data ( $p = .005$ ), as participants felt that increased recruiting of minority applicants ( $M = 3.80, SD = 1.05$ ) would be more beneficial than proportional selection quotas ( $M = 3.64, SD = 1.05$ ), which, in turn, would be more beneficial than weak preferential treatment ( $M = 3.43, SD = 1.00$ ). A final main effect of type of AAP emerged for participants' intended resistance of the AAP,  $F(2, 192) = 3.82, p = .024, \eta^2 = .038$ . As before, a linear pattern in the data ( $p = .012$ ) indicated that participants believed they would slightly resist the increased recruiting of minority applicants ( $M = 2.63, SD = 1.44$ ) and somewhat resist proportional selection quotas ( $M = 3.16, SD = 1.31$ ) and weak preferential treatment ( $M = 3.16, SD = 1.37$ ).

### *Type of Justification*

As expected by Hypothesis 2, there was a main effect of justification on the perceived beneficial outcomes of affirmative action,  $F(3, 192) = 3.39, p = .019, \eta^2 = .050$ . A planned simple contrast revealed that participants given an instrumental justification ( $M = 3.65, SD = 1.07$ ) for the AAP did not believe that the AAP would be more beneficial than did participants who received no justification ( $M = 3.33, SD = .87, p = .10$ ), contrary to Hypothesis 2a. However, participants who read either a utilitarianism justification ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.02, p = .038$ ) or a compensation justification ( $M = 3.95, SD = 1.18, p = .002$ ) felt that the AAP would be more beneficial than did participants who were given no justification, supporting Hypothesis 2b but contrary to Hypothesis 2c. Contrary to expectations, however, the type of justification did not influence participants' perceptions of the fairness of the AAP,  $F(3, 192) = 1.66, p = .18, \eta^2 = .025$ . That is, there were no differences in perceived fairness of the AAP among participants given a compensation justification ( $M = 4.01, SD = 1.42$ ), an instrumental justification ( $M = 3.54, SD = 1.33$ ), a utilitarianism justification ( $M = 3.52, SD = 1.28$ ), or no justification ( $M = 3.58, SD = 1.23$ ). Additionally, the type of justification did not influence participants' intended resistance of the AAP ( $F(3, 192) = .31, p = .82, \eta^2 = .005$ ), as there were no differences in intent among participants who received a compensation justification ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.53$ ), an instrumental justification ( $M = 3.02, SD = 1.44$ ), a utilitarianism justification ( $M = 2.98, SD = 1.29$ ), or no justification ( $M = 3.01, SD = 1.33$ ). No other differences among any of the means for any of the dependent variables reached statistical significance using additional post hoc tests.

### *Participant Gender*

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, there was a main effect of gender on participants' perceptions of the beneficial outcomes of the AAP,  $F(1, 192) = 12.25,$

$p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .060$ . As expected, female participants ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) believed that the AAP would result in more beneficial outcomes than did male participants ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .97$ ). There was also a marginally significant trend in male and female participants' intended resistance of the AAP,  $F(1, 192) = 7.31$ ,  $p = .055$ ,  $\eta^2 = .019$ . As before, female participants ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) were somewhat less likely than male participants ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) to indicate an intention to resist the AAP. Contrary to predictions, however, participant gender did not influence perceptions of AAP fairness, as male ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and female ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) participants felt that the AAP was equally fair,  $F(1, 192) = .66$ ,  $p = .42$ ,  $\eta^2 = .003$ .

### *Qualitative Data*

Using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word count program (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2001), participants' open-ended responses were analyzed for length and affective responses. Tukey post hoc tests ( $\alpha = .05$ ) were used to examine differences among cell means. As predicted in Hypothesis 6, there was an effect of type of justification on the percentage of affective or emotional process words revealed in the open-ended statements,  $F(3, 77) = 2.82$ ,  $Mse = 9.56$ ,  $p = .044$ ,  $\eta^2 = .099$ . Participants were marginally more likely to use a higher percentage of affective words (e.g., "happy," "ugly," "bitter") in their sentences when given a utilitarianism justification ( $M = 5.48$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ) than when given a compensation justification ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ,  $p = .052$ ), partially supporting Hypothesis 6a. However, there were no differences between the percentage of affective words when given a utilitarianism justification and an instrumental justification ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 2.93$ ,  $p = .80$ ) or no justification ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ,  $p = .23$ ), contrary to Hypotheses 6b and 6c.

Moreover, the type of justification influenced the percentage of positive affective words (e.g., "happy," "pretty," "good") that participants used in their open-ended responses,  $F(3, 77) = 2.97$ ,  $Mse = 8.12$ ,  $p = .037$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . Similar to the previous pattern, participants used a higher percentage of positive emotion words in their sentences when given a utilitarianism justification ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 4.04$ ) than when given a compensation justification ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ,  $p = .04$ ), thus again supporting Hypothesis 6a, but not an instrumental justification ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 3.09$ ,  $p = .80$ ) or no justification ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 2.29$ ,  $p = .31$ ), contrary to Hypotheses 6b and 6c.

## **Discussion**

The results of the present study have replicated and extended previous research by confirming that people's reactions to affirmative action plans are indeed

influenced by the type of plan, the type of justification given for it, and their gender. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed below.

### *Type of AAP*

As predicted by Hypothesis 1, and consistent with a host of previous research (e.g., Kravitz, 1995, 1997; Nacoste, 1985, 1987b), participants' reactions to AAPs were a direct function of the amount of weight placed on race in the admissions procedure. That is, there was a consistent linear trend such that the more a particular factor such as race was used as a factor in selection, the less participants felt the AAP was fair, the less they believed that it would have beneficial outcomes, and the more they anticipated acting negatively toward it. Specifically, participants felt somewhat positively toward the increased recruiting of minority applicants, less positively toward proportional selection quotas, and negatively toward weak preferential treatment. This increasing emphasis on race across the three types of AAPs seemed to result in a corresponding threat to the White participants' self-interest and perceptions of White opportunity for admission.

The type of AAP also seemed to influence some participants' open-ended responses. For example, students seemed to have positive attitudes toward the increased recruitment plan, as one participant noted, "I support the extra recruitment because it encourages minorities but does not exclude others." Support for the proportional selection quotas was more ambivalent, as one participant commented, "I feel that creating a proportional quota will force [this school] to accept some students who may not be qualified," whereas another participant remarked, "In this affirmative action program presented here, who could argue against admitting minorities proportionally to their numbers of qualified applicants? There is nothing unfair about this at all." However, almost all participants felt negatively toward the weak preferential treatment system, exemplified by one student's comment that "affirmative action programs that use a 'tie-break' system like the one described here are not eliminating racial discrimination, they are simply reversing it."

### *Type of Justification*

Hypotheses 2 and 6, which predicted that participants exposed to an instrumental or utilitarianism justification for an AAP would have more favorable reactions to it than participants exposed to a compensation justification or no justification, were partially supported. Contrary to expectations, participants given a compensation or utilitarianism justification were the most likely to believe that the AAP would result in beneficial outcomes. However, analysis of the open-ended data revealed that participants had the most positive affect toward the utilitarianism justification. Given both the quantitative and qualitative data, then, it seems that the most effective rationale for an AAP in this context is the utilitarianism justification, as

it seemingly appealed to the norms of self-interest (i.e., “it will help me”) and altruism (i.e., “it will help others”). Interestingly, it is both telling and fitting that the justification that used a diversity of rationales was the most successful way of persuading students to accept diversity as a factor in the admissions process.

In examining participant reactions to the other two types of justification, it is important to remember that the context of the study involved AAPs in higher education and not in organizations. Previous research has found that people are generally more supportive of affirmative action in education than in industry (e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 1983), perhaps because educational opportunities are seen as a right granted to all American citizens, whereas employment is perceived as a reward in a meritocratic society (Doverspike et al., 2000). Indeed, former Princeton and Harvard presidents William Bowen and Derek Bok argue that the duty of universities extends beyond conferring benefits on the most gifted individuals to having public policy components (1998). If this truly is a pervasive belief in our culture, then this provides an explanation as to why the compensation justification was more effective than the instrumental justification in changing attitudes toward AAPs in higher education. Conversely, an instrumental justification might be more convincing in an industrial setting where a utility analysis can demonstrate to what extent a diverse workforce positively affects a company’s profitability.

Contrary to expectations, the justifications only influenced participants’ perceptions of how beneficial the AAP would be, but not their perceptions of how fair the AAP was or how likely they were to oppose the AAP. This result seems to indicate that participants might view fairness and usefulness as two separate ideals. That is, it is possible that people might believe that an AAP is unfair, but that it is still a necessary and beneficial program. Many of the open-ended responses seemed to corroborate this view. For example, one participant stated that “affirmative action plans aren’t fair, but they are the right thing to do (fairness and correctness are not the same).” Similarly, another student commented that “affirmative action is an unfair system with a fair goal.” Likewise, a final participant said, “I think affirmative action in higher education is inherently unjust and unjustifiable. However, I wish my university had more minority students, and I suppose affirmative action would accomplish this.”

### *Participant Gender*

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, female participants had more positive attitudes than male participants toward the AAPs. Male participants were more likely to anticipate acting negatively toward the AAP and were less likely to perceive any beneficial outcomes from the AAP than were female participants. This pattern is consistent with previous research, which also indicates that women are more supportive of affirmative action than men, even when the AAP is race based and not gender based (e.g., Kravitz & Platania, 1992). Perhaps women believe that

such a program is in their cooperative self-interest (Kluegel & Smith, 1983) and so think that attention to race in the selection process also would indirectly help them through highlighting a need for greater diversity in all forms. Additionally, women might be potentially more sensitive to and aware of discrimination that minorities face in society and consequently are more concerned with equality than equity in admittance procedures (Doverspike et al., 2000).

Contrary to Hypotheses 3 and 5, there were no interactions between the type of justification, type of AAP, and participant gender. Perhaps this indicates that the influence of the justification transcends any potential moderating variables related to the type of program or student gender. If so, this has important practical implications in that university officials might not need to tailor their justifications to specific groups but instead should focus on developing a universal and encompassing information campaign about the AAP aimed at the entire campus.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

There were several limitations of the present study, most notably that the affirmative action plan was only hypothetically implemented. However, because the context of this study involved affirmative action in higher education, participants' self-interest was more involved than it is in many studies that have used an undergraduate sample to generalize about employee reactions to AAPs in organizations (c.f., Kravitz, 1997). As such, the current study has extended previous research by exploring reactions to affirmative action using a more appropriate sample. Had participants not felt personally engaged by the memo, it is likely that their reported attitudes to the AAP would have been positively skewed and not normally distributed, as they were found to be in this study.

Another potential limitation is that participants were simply reacting to demand characteristics in the justifications and true attitude change toward AAPs was not measured (Bell, 1996). However, this limitation is tempered by the behavioral measure (i.e., recording feelings about the AAP in a provided space) included in the study. Because the qualitative data revealed many of the same patterns found in the quantitative data, it seems that the justifications actually did impact attitudes toward AAP. Moreover, the fact that modest effects were gained through using a few simple statements in a hypothetical memorandum implies that even greater effects would be obtained if more involved measures (e.g., a marketing campaign, workshops, speakers, distribution of relevant research to the campus community) were used. In this instance, it is possible that more robust and enduring attitude change would occur.

A final limitation is that the generalizability of the current study is limited by the particular participant sample. It is unknown to what extent the current findings would generalize to different schools (e.g., law, medical, graduate, and business school), in different regions of the country or world, with different political

beliefs, with different student body racial compositions, and with different levels of institutional prestige. As such, it is crucial to conduct more research to determine how justifications operate across these very disparate settings.

Given the paucity of literature on the effects of framing and rationales on attitudes toward affirmative action, there is still much profitable research to be conducted within the area. Certainly, given the findings of the current study, future researchers should not treat instrumental and compensation justifications as mutually exclusive frames; instead they should continue to explore how utilitarianism justifications affect participants in different contexts. Furthermore, an important next step is to use an organizational setting to determine if the findings from this study generalize to public and private industry. As with educational diversity, there is an emergent body of literature documenting the positive effects of workforce diversity on organizational outcomes (e.g., Cox & Blake, 1991; De Vries & Pettigrew, 1994; Fernandez, 1993; Herriot & Pemberton, 1995). In a business context, an instrumental justification might be most effective in the latter case because organizations are interested in "the bottom line" and gaining a competitive advantage through diversity. It would also be beneficial to explore how justifications influence reactions to different kinds of AAPs, such as gender-based and age-based programs.

Within the instrumental framework, there are several ways in which the construct could be manipulated. For example, the justification for an AAP could be framed as either directly benefiting individual employees (e.g., through improving their leadership skills and making them more culturally aware) or as benefiting the entire organization (through making the company better able to attract and serve diverse clients/customers). In this more macro frame, it might be the case that employees with a more collectivist view or with higher organizational identification would develop more favorable attitudes than individualistic employees.

Additionally, prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984) could be used to explore how framing a risky behavior (e.g., implementing a new affirmative action program or diversity initiative) could influence attitudes. Meyerowitz and Chaiken (1987) found that people develop more positive attitudes toward a behavior when they are led to believe that they will suffer losses because of inaction rather than when they are led to believe that they will receive gains through performing the behavior. Similarly, a frame that utilizes fear (e.g., losing a competitive advantage through not developing a diverse workforce or student body) might be more effective than one that focuses on positive benefits (e.g., creating a more creative, innovative, and effective work or educational environment).

To date, there is no research on how different justifications for AAPs influence participants of different races and ethnicities. It may be that minorities will be more affected than Whites by a compensation frame because it directly appeals to their self-interest and how they will benefit. Conversely, they may respond negatively

to a compensation justification if they feel it will stigmatize them in the eyes of nonbeneficiaries (Barnes-Nacoste, 1990). An alternate explanation is that, like the White participants in the current study, they will be the most influenced by the utilitarianism rationale because it highlights the benefits that all parties receive. Furthermore, it could be the case that different racial groups (and even subgroups within these categories) are more receptive to certain justifications than others. For example, untenured Black professors might be more receptive to a compensation frame than tenured Black professors because it is the former group that stands to gain from an AAP (not the latter group); so a compensation frame would speak directly to untenured Black professors' self-interest (Niemann & Dovidio, 1998). Clearly, given the complexities of collective- and self-interest, there is a need for more research using minority participants to clarify this issue.

Finally, it is also important for universities and organizations to learn how to successfully implement AAPs in order to achieve the desired benefits outlined in the justifications. Administrators and management often do not follow through with diversity initiatives and then claim that the programs were inherently flawed. This lack of follow-up seems to have been the case in one participant's response, as the student noted, "The problem with this sort of affirmative action is that it rests on the assumption that, once recruited and admitted, minority students would tend to associate to a large extent with members outside their predominantly minority groups. While benefits listed might accrue if this actually happened, experience has shown that, at [this university] in particular, minorities (and other specialized students like athletes) tend to maintain a segregated lifestyle. Thus any supposed advantages gained from the affirmative action will most likely fail to materialize." As such, it is vital to teach students and employees to how to value their own heritage and culture while simultaneously sharing it with their peers.

### *Conclusion*

The current study sought to confirm and extend previous research by exploring how the justification given for different affirmative action programs affected nonbeneficiaries' acceptance of or resistance to the plan. Across all different types of AAPs and across all different types of participant characteristics, it seems that a utilitarianism justification that emphasized benefits to both minority and majority groups was the most successful in inducing positive attitudes toward AAPs. Hopefully, this study as well as future research will help determine the mechanisms and parameters for how, to what extent, and under what conditions a rationale can successfully influence responses to AAPs. Through exploring how different justifications can influence self-interest and attitudes toward AAPs, perhaps science can help society realize the value of diversity initiatives and consequently develop an affirmative reaction to affirmative action.

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## Appendix A

Every year thousands of colleges and universities accept millions of students. Selection decisions are critically important for both the applicants and the universities. The importance for applicants is obvious: a college education is essential to competing in today's market. The decisions also are important for universities, as the school's reputation depends on the quality of the students. Although there has been a lengthy debate over the merits of affirmative action, Rice has decided to develop and implement an affirmative action plan (AAP) because we feel it will ultimately be beneficial [NO JUSTIFICATION], "...ultimately be beneficial to minority applicants for the following six reasons" [COMPENSATION], "...ultimately be beneficial to you for the following six reasons [INSTRUMENTAL], or "...ultimately be beneficial to you and to minority applicants for the following six reasons [UTILITARIANISM]."

### *Compensation Justifications*

- Creating a diverse student body through affirmative action helps minority students develop strong career networks and contacts that will aid them in the future.
- Through being seen as an institution devoted to diversity, affirmative action will help the university to be successful in recruiting other qualified minority students.
- Having an AAP now will lead to more role models and mentors for other minority applicants, which will help reduce possible future retention problems.
- The use of affirmative action will help to make the selection procedure more fair and just for minority applicants, thus increasing the number of qualified minority applications.
- Affirmative action decreases the effects of race stereotyping in the selection decision process, which allows unbiased decisions to be made.
- Because affirmative action helps to increase the college satisfaction of minority students, universities are better able to attract and retain top minority students.

*Instrumental Justifications*

- Affirmative action leads to a broader array of perspectives in the classroom, which enhances the range of discussion and the level of intellectual challenge for all students.
- Through learning how to effectively interact with diverse peers, all students are better able to relate to diverse clients/coworkers in the future because of affirmative action.
- Because of affirmative action, all students can have the opportunity to socialize with diverse peers, which results in students' improved interpersonal and leadership skills.
- Students learn more and think in deeper, more complex ways in a diverse educational environment created by affirmative action.
- Students educated in diverse settings created by affirmative action are more motivated and better able to participate in an increasingly heterogeneous and complex world.
- Studying in a diverse environment formed by affirmative action allows all students to obtain the skills necessary to successfully live and work in a diverse society.

*Utilitarianism Justifications*

- Affirmative action leads to a broader array of perspectives in the classroom, which enhances the range of discussion and the level of intellectual challenge for all students.
- Creating a diverse student body through affirmative action helps minority students develop strong career networks and contacts that will aid them in the future.
- Through learning how to effectively interact with diverse peers, all students are better able to relate to diverse clients/coworkers in the future because of affirmative action.
- Through being seen as an institution devoted to diversity, affirmative action will help the university to be successful in recruiting other qualified minority students.
- Because of affirmative action, all students can have the opportunity to socialize with diverse peers, which results in students' improved interpersonal and leadership skills.
- Having an AAP now will lead to more role models and mentors for other minority applicants, which will help reduce possible future retention problems.

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