

Affirmative Action and Social Justice: Introduction

Susan Opotow¹

Affirmative action programs are those that seek to redress racial and gender discrimination in the work force. Initiated 1965 in the United States, affirmative action focuses on hiring and promotion practices and on broader employment issues, such as the culture at work and effects of gender segregation in jobs (e.g., Holloway, 1989; Kilborn, 1990, 1991; Lowe and Wittig, 1989; Uchitelle, 1990). Affirmative action often elicits strong positive and negative reactions and considerable controversy. In brief, opponents claim that affirmative action unfairly disadvantages non-beneficiaries (i.e., white men) and, in addition, harms and stigmatizes beneficiaries (e.g., Sowell, 1990; Steele, 1990; see also Nacoste, 1989). Proponents assert the important role of affirmative action in restoring justice and equal opportunity to a society that has been unable to eliminate prejudice and discrimination. Because the basis of this controversy is social justice and because this topic has worldwide relevance, affirmative action is an especially apt focus for *Social Justice Research*.

All papers in this issue focus on affirmative action research. For some papers, affirmative action is a means, a social intervention that offers social scientists an opportunity to examine existing theories of justice. For other papers, affirmative action is an end, for which justice theory can clarify the problems of affirmative action. Papers here are roughly ordered from those whose primary focus is justice theory to those whose primary focus is affirmative action.

This array, while useful, is overly simplistic. Each paper examines how theory can (or should) influence practice and at how practice can (and should) inform theory. In doing so, the papers reframe the more obvious justice question of affirmative action—"Is it fair?"—with more subtle and

¹Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York 10027.

precise justice questions. The fine-grained, thoughtful approaches that these authors take sample the unspoken but key issues that influence our beliefs about the fairness of affirmative action. Moreover, the issues examined here in the context of affirmative action may offer insight into justice concerns that underlie other prominent social issues, such as reproductive freedom and the morality of war.

Within the limits of the space available, this thoughtful collection of empirical papers offers students of justice a remarkable range of theories and methods as they probe the complex social justice issues embedded in affirmative action.

THE INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

Using affirmative action as a starting point, Lea Ayers untangles what is fair and unfair about it. She asks: *How do various elements of justice judgments contribute to beliefs about what is fair and unfair?* Her content analysis of complex qualitative data examines procedural justice theory from the perspective of affirmative action's beneficiaries. In $2 \times 2 \times 6$ tables, Ayers teases apart the contributions of principle and practice to judgments of fairness and unfairness and looks at each in the context of Tyler's six elements of justice criteria (representation, consistency, impartiality, accuracy, correctibility, and ethicality). Ayers's data highlight the importance of consistency in justice judgments and offer insights into other salient justice concerns that emerged in the context of affirmative action. The detailed and clear descriptions of coding procedures make an important and useful contribution to the qualitative methodology of justice research.

Focusing on the counterintuitive findings that minority group members object to policies designed to improved their lot, Francine Tougas and Ann Beaton examine how attitudes about fairness can change over time. They ask: *Under what social conditions are recipients of preferential treatment likely to perceive these policies as fair?* Tougas and Beaton present data that indicate an increasing support for preferential treatment during the past decade among French-Canadian women, a double minority. They discuss the social and psychological conditions likely to have induced this attitudinal change as well as possible theoretical explanations for it. This work, already useful, will have increasingly important policy implications as women become more aware of wage inequity and as minorities constitute an increasingly larger proportion of the work force.

In contrast to the two previous papers, Pamela Reid and Susan Clayton focus on society's views rather than those of affirmative action program recipients. They ask: *How does the recipient's social category influence peo-*

ple's beliefs about the need for and fairness of affirmative action? Focusing on racism and sexism, the authors contrast social, legal, and historical antecedents and perceptual and behavioral consequences. In this close examination of the similarities and differences between sexism and racism, the authors reveal the far-reaching justice implications of social categorizations. Reid and Clayton give particular attention to the interaction of racism and sexism: the case of African-American women. Based on these analyses, the authors' discussion of the resistance to and need for affirmative action is a valuable contribution to justice research and to the practice of policies that abet social justice.

Rupert Barnes Nacoste provides an unusually broad overview of affirmative action. He asks: *What factors determine the fairness of affirmative action?* His paper describes the interrelationships among the essential elements of affirmative action, an "ecology of affirmative action," that takes psychological and material outcomes of affirmative action programs into account for both program recipients and nonrecipients. Using this framework, Barnes Nacoste identifies biases and omissions in the affirmative action literature and he identifies implementation policies and relational justice as key factors in assessing affirmative action fairness. This paper offers a useful perspective to policy makers, to researchers concerned with the effects of policies on organizational outcomes, and to justice theorists.

Also looking at intergroup issues in affirmative action, Michele Wittig and Schuyler Berman ask: *How can wage inequity be accurately detected across dissimilar and gender-segregated jobs?* Using advanced statistical methods and actual data, Wittig and Schuyler demonstrate how to obtain reliable job evaluation criteria and how to use these criteria to fairly compare wages across groups. Although the focus of their paper is a methodology that can be used to fairly assess group differences, their findings isolate interesting differences in the job characteristics and in the wage structure of male- and female-dominated jobs. This clear, elegant, and practical paper offers researchers and policy makers interested in reducing wage inequity the tools for doing so. Although their data focus on gender discrimination, the paper addresses methods for detecting wage inequity that result from any kind of social categorizations, including ethnicity, and, in the international sphere, categorizations that result from political and economic change.

Diana Cordova examines how psychological variables influence our perceptions of injustice. She asks: *How does data presentation influence the detection of discriminatory patterns?* In her investigation of the effect of presentational format on perceptions of sex discrimination in wages, Cordova found that subjects presented with either aggregate data or case-by-case data can recognize gender-based wage discrepancies; only subjects pre-

sented with aggregate data, however, could recognize the discrepancy and attribute it to sex discrimination. This suggests that perception of a discrepancy is a necessary first step, but, in itself, insufficient to recognize that discrimination exists and needs to be corrected. This paper has obvious policy implications for affirmative action, and, in addition, has interesting implications for distributive fairness.

In the final paper that focuses on affirmative action in the United States, Faye Crosby, Brenda Allen, and Susan Opotow ask: *Has affirmative action unintentionally harmed one of its target groups—black Americans—by widening the economic gap between better-off and worse-off blacks?* Several well-known critics have claimed that affirmative action has caused a bifurcation of the black community into “rich” and “poor.” In statistical analyses of archival income data, Crosby, Allen, and Opotow find no substantiation of this claim. Their finding that the economic gap between blacks and whites has not narrowed, however, suggests that while affirmative action is necessary, it cannot—by itself—redress all the racial imbalances that prevent us from achieving a just society.

REFERENCES

- Holloway, F.A. (1989). What is affirmative action? In Blanchard, F. A., and Crosby, F. J. (eds.), *Affirmative Action in Perspective*, Springer-Verlag, New York.
- Kilborn, P.T. (1990, Oct. 4). A company recasts itself to erase bias on the job. *New York Times*, pp. A1, D21.
- Kilborn, P. T. (1991, May 12). When equal rights is a goal, worker's response is mixed. *New York Times*, pp. 1, 20.
- Lowe, R. H., and Wittig, M. A. (eds.). (1989). Approaching pay equity through comparable worth [Special issue]. *J. Social Issues*, 45(5).
- Nacoste, R. W. (1989). Affirmative action and self-evaluation. In Blanchard, F. J., and Crosby, F. A. (eds.), *Affirmative Action in Perspective*, Springer-Verlag, New York.
- Sowell, T. (1990). *Preferential Policies: An International Perspective*, William Morrow, New York.
- Steele, S. (1990). *The Content of Our Character*, St. Martin's Press, New York.
- Uchitelle, L., (1990, August 14). Unequal pay for equal work is found to be widespread in U.S. *New York Times*, pp. D1, D8.