

## **Perceptions of Affirmative Action Among Its Beneficiaries**

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*Using data obtained through a separate study, interviews with women of color associated with and involved in the development of an affirmative action (AA) program were analyzed in light of Tyler's theories of procedural justice. Interviews were examined for respondents' implicit or explicit judgments of AA as fair or unfair in principle and in practice, and whether respondents used Tyler's six elements of justice criteria (representation, consistency, impartiality, accuracy, correctibility, and ethicality) in their assessments. Tyler's criteria are used by the respondents in their assessments. Beneficiaries perceive AA to be fair in both contexts, although fairer in principle than in practice. The issue of commitment was raised in several contexts as a salient concern of many of the respondents, and several concrete examples of deficiencies and successes in the ways AA is implemented are reported.*

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That Americans care about justice has been demonstrated again and again. Research indicates that assessments of fairness of legal decision-making processes influence evaluations of legal authorities and litigants' outcome satisfaction in judicial settings (Lind, 1982; Tyler, 1984; Walker and Lind, 1984). Additionally, procedural justice is important with people's interactions with police (Tyler, 1986b; Tyler and Folger, 1980), in political allocations (Tyler, 1986a; Tyler and Caine, 1981; Tyler, Rasinski and McGraw, 1985), managerial situations (Folger and Greenberg, 1985; Greenberg and

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Folger, 1983), and interpersonal interaction (Barrett-Howard and Tyler, 1986).

How do people decide what is fair? Early theorists like Deutsch (1949, 1975, 1985) and Lerner (1965, 1971, 1980) focused on what makes people satisfied or dissatisfied with the distribution of positive and negative outcomes to themselves and others. Thibaut and Walker (1975) shifted attention away from outcomes and towards the procedures by which distributions are decided, but they assumed that people are generally most interested in outcomes and most likely to judge processes as fair ones if the outcomes are favorable to them. Subsequent theorists (e.g., Lind, 1982; Lind and Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1984; 1986a; 1986b; 1990; Tyler and Caine, 1981; Tyler and Folger, 1980; Tyler, Rasinski, and McGraw, 1985) have moved further along the continuum and proposed that procedural justice judgments occur independently of outcomes; and indeed, some have even demonstrated how people's assessments of procedures effect their satisfactions with outcomes (Folger and Martin, 1986).

A concern with procedures leads almost inevitably to the next question: What makes procedures seem fair? Observing that procedures seem fair when people feel attached to or part of the system, Tyler and his associates have identified six specific elements that influence the fairness judgments of procedures. These six criteria are conceptually distinct from the outcomes of a procedure that have also been shown to influence judgments of fairness (Lind and Tyler, 1988).

First, *representation* refers to both decision control and process control. Decision control, emphasized in early procedural justice theory, means having direct control over outcomes; process control is a less direct means of control over outcomes through presentation of viewpoint. Tyler, Rasinski, and Spodnick (1985) found that process control is important, regardless of favorability of outcome. This they termed the value-expressive effect. It is important to people that they be allowed to participate in a process, even if it is unlikely that the exercise of "voice" will effect outcomes. Although frustration can occur when seemingly fair procedures (such as the exercise of voice) produce unfair outcomes (Folger, 1977), in most cases the expression of opinions allows for a sense of participation in the procedure. The absence of the opportunity for process control in procedures appears to deny full membership rights to those denied voice. People feel invalidated when they can not speak for themselves, share their experiences, their perspectives, and articulate their needs (Tyler, 1987).

Second, *consistency* refers to applications of procedures across persons and across time. Consistency signifies that procedures, rules, or standards be communicated clearly and apply equally to all participants of a system. Consistency demonstrates coherence of all parts. In a hierarchical system,

this means up and down and across all levels of the hierarchy. A positive consistency judgment depends on the belief that treatment of all individuals is compatible with stated rules, goals, and values.

*Impartiality* attaches to the judgment that decisions are determined honestly, from a neutral perspective. Honesty is compromised if the decision maker has a vested interest in the outcome. Unbiased decisions require suspension of beliefs on the part of the decision maker which hinder giving adequate and equal consideration to all points of view. Evidence of a leader or authority's impropriety undermines trust in that person's decision-making abilities (Tyler, 1984; Tyler and Caine, 1981).

Next, *accuracy* relies on gathering information about the issues surrounding the decision, bringing the issues out into the open, and implementing appropriate methods towards resolution of problems. Appropriate methods of implementing solutions to problems requires a solid understanding of the issues. Fairness judgments are enhanced to the degree that the decisions are perceived to be made from an informed perspective.

The fifth element, according to Tyler, is *correctibility*, or the opportunity for correcting errors. Grievance and appeals procedures necessarily exist under a fair system to address correctibility concerns. The design of procedures must include means of identifying problems and addressing complaints of unfairness, subject to the same fairness criteria as the system itself (e.g., representation, consistency, impartiality, accuracy, correctibility, and ethicality). Correctibility also includes monitoring progress through the tracking of goals.

Finally, *ethicality* encompasses concerns of politeness and respect of individuals' rights. Ethicality issues are especially important to individuals who are unsure of their status within a group or system. Treatment perceived as respectful reinforces an individual's positive self-image and sense of personal worth (Bies and Moag, 1986; Tyler, 1986c; Tyler and Folger, 1980). Impoliteness violates basic norms and denies the recipient's dignity as full-status member of the group. Procedures reflecting personal sensitivity are more likely to result in fairness judgments. Procedures likely to be judged unfair are those that leave people feeling patronized, condescended to, or unappreciated.

One policy that sometimes appears to violate the basic tenets of procedural justice is affirmative action (AA), a national policy that aims to redistribute the goods and opportunities in our country through rectifying historical racial and sexual injustices. Although AA may appear to violate fundamental concepts of justice by changing established rules and applying different standards to different groups of people, it actually attempts to level the playing field of opportunity. Affirmative action has drawn its share of detractors, some of whom (like President George Bush) are nationally

prominent. Certainly there may be reasons to question the fairness of affirmative action. On the surface, equal opportunity may appear to be a system that is more procedurally fair than AA. Closer inspection of the equal opportunity system reveals it as a policy reactive to discrimination rather than preventative. Ideally, equal opportunity allows members of a system to move forward and upward without regard to sex or race. The continued incidence of racism and sexism demonstrates the failure of a system based on denial that sex and race matter. The passive nature of equal opportunity programs have failed to address the problem because the disadvantaged continue to be passed by and disregarded. Rather than acting in denial of discrimination, affirmative action programs address the issues directly, by taking positive steps to advance the employment status of target groups, such as actively recruiting individuals from groups previously excluded from the system (Carson and Crosby, 1988; Clayton and Crosby, in press; Clayton and Tangri, 1989).

When those who have been privileged by the status quo criticize the policy of affirmative action, motives of self-interest and/or racism and sexism present themselves as plausible explanations for the criticism (Dovidio *et al.*, 1989). But when the intended beneficiaries of the policy criticize it, one must question very strongly the fairness of affirmative action. To use people's reactions to AA as a solid test of procedural justice concerns, one should, therefore, examine the reactions of those who stand to gain by AA.

Do beneficiaries criticize affirmative action? Simulation studies (Nacoste, 1985, 1987, 1989) have shown that people who benefit from what appears to be an unfair application of affirmative action can feel undermined by the policy and can dislike it. Surveys by Tougas and Veilleux (1989) in Canada reveal that women do not wish to have their careers furthered by preferential treatment or quota systems. In an in-depth study of Hispanic managers in a firm in Connecticut, Ferdman (1989) uncovered some ambivalence among those who stood to profit from the policy. Most of the managers felt uncomfortable with labels, even as they saw their necessity, and some may have questioned the fundamental fairness of affirmative action. A few black scholars (Loury, 1985; Sowell, 1976, 1990; Steele, 1990) have criticized the policy openly and vigorously.

### Present Study

Do intended beneficiaries of affirmative action see their experiences with affirmative action as fair or unfair? In which ways and on what basis? This paper discusses some secondary data collected in a separate investigation. Interviews were conducted with 13 women of color who were all

associated with and/or involved in the development of a vigorous AA program at a liberal arts college. They described their experiences and perceptions. The present study examined the original transcripts for indications of the women's perceptions of AA as fair or unfair. To the extent that they saw AA as fair or unfair, was it with regard to the principle or the practice? Respondents' concerns with justice were assessed to see if they concerned questions of representation, consistency, impartiality, accuracy, correctibility, and ethicality in making fairness judgments. We expected the participants to describe AA in practice as more unfair than AA in principle, and we expected to find Tyler's six elements of procedural justice as the bases for their evaluations.

## Methods

### Participants and Procedures

The study was conducted at a liberal arts college in Massachusetts. The sample was selected by considering women who we knew had been involved in AA programs. Participants in the study were contacted by telephone or by letter and were aware of the purpose of the study, which was to investigate whether self-esteem was undermined by being AA beneficiaries. The respondents of the study included three undergraduate students, three graduate students, four women in professorial positions, and three administrators who had participated in some of the college's affirmative action programs. Most had been involved in a lecture series that was part of the AA program. Eleven of the women were black, one was Hispanic, and one was Asian-American. Ages ranged from about 20 to about 60 years old.

All participants who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. An open-ended interview schedule was developed to investigate the participants' evaluations of AA, modified slightly to address the particular positions of each respondent. Through the summer and early fall of 1990, six of the interviews were conducted in person, and seven were conducted over the telephone. The interviews were taped, with the informed consent of the respondent, and transcribed. Interviews varied in length from  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour to 2 hours.

All respondents were asked to describe their connection to the college community, the events leading to their affiliation, and experiences in their respective positions. Respondents were encouraged to relate high points, low points, whether they ever felt undermined or labeled, and also to characterize the climate at the college with regard to sex and race. Each re-

respondent was asked her assessment of the processes involved in attaining her position, and encouraged to make suggestions for improving the process. The interviewer asked the respondents to share their perceptions of AA in terms of what it means, how it is supposed to work, how it actually works, and how they perceived others' thoughts about AA. And finally, respondents were encouraged to add any other comments that were not specifically asked by the interviewer.

### Scoring the Transcripts

Transcripts were first scored completely by the coder who developed the coding manual (L.A.). To ensure reliability an independent coder was recruited. The independent coder was well versed about affirmative action but was unfamiliar with Tyler's theory of procedural justice. The second coder read the transcripts and was given a sample of 30% of the identified quotations to classify according to Tyler's six criteria.

Transcripts were scored for several things. First, interviews were assessed to determine whether respondents differentiated between AA in principle and AA in practice. Then, if they differentiated, did they see either (principle or practice) as fair or unfair? Finally, what were the elements used in their determinations of fairness or unfairness?

A specific question on the interview schedule asked the respondents to "describe how AA is supposed to work, and how it actually does work." The phrasing of this question facilitated coders' distinctions between principle and practice. When respondents talked about AA as a concept, or a general idea, or a policy, comments were classified as referring to AA in principle. Alternatively, when respondents' comments reflected personal experiences, or discussion referred to AA programs which are currently instituted, these comments were classified as referring to AA in practice. This process enabled examination of data from conceptual as well as practical viewpoints.

For judgments of fairness and unfairness, coders based their assessments on respondents' use of explicit justice terms, and also used what was implied in larger circumlocutions. Whenever the words equality, equity, fairness, inequality, inequity, injustice, justice or unfairness were spoken, for example, the raters determined whether the respondent thought AA to be fair or unfair in principle or practice. The following quotation, for example, was coded as AA being fair in principle and in practice:

I don't think AA gives unfair advantage; it gives an equal advantage that they have been denied previously. It serves to equalize opportunity and access to various positions for which people are qualified anyway, and have been denied.

**Table I.** Examples of Quotation Classifications by Justice Element and Descriptive Features of Justice Element

Element	Description	Examples
Representation	Decision and process control sense of "voice"	"In the overall structure, being involved in financial and personnel, certainly I've been included as part of the team." And, "I was notified by mail that I was to be the recipient of this scholarship. I did not apply or solicit this. I don't know if I like being selected for something I did not apply to."
Consistency	Clearly stated standards, equal application across all members	"The actual selection process was not a problem. I had a good experience with the department and the community at large." And, "AA is not working because the goals of different levels do not always come together."
Impartiality	Neutrality, nonbias, honesty in decision making	"I felt people were genuinely interested in finding a person of color to join the faculty." And "If the department had been honest, I could have thought I had earned it, deserved it, but I will never believe it."
Accuracy	Efforts to make informed decisions, correct interpretations of the policy, gathering info, educating	"Attendance of lectures by senior faculty and administrators will make them better able to make decisions when they understand the population from which they are drawing upon." and, "Some people interpret AA as giving blacks something. It's not giving people anything, but undoing something wrong in society from the beginning."
Correctibility	Methods of identifying problems, setting goals, tracking problems, channels for addressing concerns	"[the college's AA program] is very well articulated. It gives reasoning about why certain numbers are important. It is very clear in the goals and the message." And, "I wonder how much the committee worked together at all, because they could have seen the problems developing and not let it get this far."
Ethicality	Sensitivity to ethnic or gender issues; respectfulness, validation, patronization, tokenism, or condescension	"I was given a lot of leeway to do what I thought was best. I was included in the administrative structure". And, "There are serious incidents of racial and sexual violence on many campuses that aren't dealt with on the administrative level."

Implicit distinctions also were used: "I understand the policy of AA as an effort to rectify the historical wrongs and discriminations in an expedient manner. It is important and necessary. Very positive things come from it." This statement was coded as an implicit judgment of AA in principle as fair.

Once the basic determinations had been made, the coders examined respondents' bases for fairness judgments according to Tyler's six criteria. Whereas fairness or unfairness judgments were mutually exclusive, judgments about the criteria were not. Any one quotation could be assessed as mentioning more than one element. Respondents' applications of Tyler's justice elements were examined in the contexts of their assessments of both principle and practice of AA. Table I provides descriptive features of each element and examples of quotations classified under each of the six elements.

## RESULTS

The two coders were in absolute agreement about whether respondents differentiated between the principle and the practice of AA. As to whether the respondents saw AA as fair or unfair in principle or fair or unfair in practice, coders were in absolute agreement 85% of the time. Across criteria classification, coders were in absolute agreement 83% of the time. Disagreement was resolved through discussion, coders explaining rationales for their decisions based on the definitions of the six elements, and ultimately were in 100% agreement of the classifications. Concerns with issues corresponding to the elements of representation, accuracy, correctibility, and ethicality were generally the easiest to identify, based on the descriptive features listed in Table I. More difficult differences between coder classifications occurred with quotations that met criteria for more than one category, and most commonly occurred with quotations referring to consistency and impartiality. By definition, impartiality judgments are more directly focused on the perceived perspectives or attitudes of the decision makers, whereas consistency applies to an extension of the attitudes as they affect the members of a system. There were many cases when comments were classified as referring to both elements, such as, "There is an extra burden in that there may be some who want you to be superqualified"; "people will question whether you are lowering your standards of excellence. Disclaiming it even reinforces it."; and "administrations must allow diverse members to proceed in a different manner, and agree that the difference is valued."

### Tyler's Criteria of Procedural Justice

The data in Table II demonstrate that Tyler's criteria were applied by respondents in their evaluations of AA. The numbers in each cell represent the number of respondents mentioning a specific element in each fairness context (principle: fair or unfair, or practice: fair or unfair).

**Table II.** Distribution of Respondents Raising Concerns Corresponding to Justice Elements in Evaluations of Affirmative Action<sup>a</sup>

Element	Principle		Practice		Totals
	Fair	Unfair	Fair	Unfair	
Representation	4	0	7	5	16
Consistency	5	1	9	9	24
Impartiality	3	0	4	7	14
Accuracy	4	0	8	8	20
Correctibility	5	0	10	3	18
Ethicality	3	0	5	8	16
Totals	24	1	43	40	108

<sup>a</sup>Values represent the numbers of respondents spontaneously mentioning the element (explicitly or implicitly). *n* of respondents = 13. Any single respondent could have mentioned more than one element.

Respondents raised all six elements in their evaluations of AA as fair in principle. It is notable that consistency is the single element raised in reference to what is unfair about the principle of affirmative action ("I think that AA gives preferential treatment to minorities and women, and that it might actually function as reverse discrimination"). Respondents almost unanimously described AA as fair in principle as shown in the totals in Table II.

Respondents' comments are more broadly distributed across the six elements in their evaluations of the practice of AA. Respondents raised all six elements when they talked about what was fair about the practice of AA as well as when they talked about what was unfair. Representation and correctibility were raised by more respondents in the context of fairness of AA than unfairness of AA (in practice). Consistency and accuracy were raised by equal numbers of respondents across fairness and unfairness of AA in practice. Impartiality and ethicality issues were raised by more respondents when describing what is unfair than what is fair about the practice of AA. More respondents described AA in terms of fairness than unfairness, but the imbalance was not as marked for the practice of AA as for the principle.

The 13 respondents generated 139 statements, which were then coded according to which justice elements they raised. When all the statements were categorized by which elements were raised, there were 223 mentions. The distribution of mentions in Table III identifies which issues seem more important to the respondents. Regarding both principle and practice of AA, consistency was mentioned most often. For all the elements, except for cor-

**Table III.** Distribution of Statements Across Justice Criteria in Evaluations of Affirmative Action<sup>a</sup>

Element	Principle		Practice		Totals
	Fair	Unfair	Fair	Unfair	
Representation	6	0	12	14	32
Consistency	17	1	17	23	58
Impartiality	7	0	5	22	34
Accuracy	8	0	10	19	37
Correctibility	10	0	15	4	29
Ethicality	3	0	7	23	23
Totals	51	1	66	105	223

<sup>a</sup>Values in cells represent the numbers of mentions (including multiple mentions by any respondent). Total *n* of mentions = 223.

rectibility, respondents produced more mentions of unfairness than fairness. For correctibility, respondents produced four times as many statements that mentioned fairness.

Among the elements used in describing fairness of AA in principle, consistency and correctibility are raised with the greatest frequency by mentions and by respondents. Across fairness and unfairness, issues of consistency and accuracy are mentioned with the greatest frequency by mentions and by respondents.

### Other Salient Concerns

In addition to Tyler’s six criteria, several other common themes were raised. One common concern expressed throughout the interviews was the belief held by some that with the implementation of AA standards of quality fell: “with affirmative action people will question whether you are lowering your standards of excellence.” Another, speaking about the implementation of AA in educational institutions, said:

It is not a decision made purely on the basis of one’s sex or race, but rather a redefining of what diversity will bring to enrich the university life and community ... it may mean that a different approach may be taken to the process of recruitment and to the assessment of applicants ... it will be recognized that the enriching of that community is a responsibility that lies not just with the applicant, but with the institution in terms of allowing those individuals who make up that diversity to proceed in a manner that may be different, but yet to agree that those things are equally as valuable.

Several respondents disputed the efficacy of striving for diversity through forcing people that are brought in to fit into the existing structure. One respondent, who described herself as being "disillusioned with the college" said: "I'm really surprised that diversity is interpreted more as numbers rather than qualitative change."

Several respondents tied their dissatisfaction with AA to a sense of lack of commitment by the college: "We were treated as subjects, watched, observed ... we were given this gift, not based on our qualifications, but because the college is trying to develop this design for diversity," and "It felt like we should still function in a slave-type mentality." In discussing the merits of the college's affirmative action plan, one respondent said, "I think it's necessary ... I don't think there are many alternatives. But I really question whether or not it will be successful, because I don't know that the underlying commitment to something like this is really here." A more positive comment was: "the administration really has to properly enforce the [AA plan], and have people in place that can see to it that the design is implemented and actually followed through on, and not just lip service. And it seems that that is indeed what's happening."

The importance of commitment was evidenced by the frequency with which respondents raised the issue, and also because it was raised in context to all six elements. One respondent articulated the importance of commitment across members of the system:

the faculty needs to take a look at the fact that if they want to change the climate of the University, that one of the ways to do that is not by people having a feeling that they want to do it, but that people have made a commitment, and have developed a relationship that can stand assessment from a larger group .... They can look at it as to: What is it that I contribute to create a climate that would make a person want to be here.

Several respondents cited the college's administration's effort in developing a clear and concise AA plan, reflecting issues of accuracy and correctability, as evidence of the college's commitment to change and progress. One stated, "It's a good plan with goals, objectives, standards for evaluation and measuring progress. It's a reasonable approach, a way to give more than lip service. It's well-thought-out, argued, and checked for legalities." Another, also incorporating the element of consistency, cited, "I think the plan is a good one, and that's because it is coming very strong from the top down and it's created a more positive environment for faculty and students to deal with the issue of diversity directly."

Respondents also mentioned personal experiences in terms of perceived respect and interest on the parts of various departments. Examples of respondents' positive comments reflecting issues of representation and

ethicality included: "People within the department have been supportive yet respectful of my independence" and "People were genuinely interested in finding a person of color to join the faculty ... not just interested in interviewing me, but looking at goodness of fit between my interests and needs and those of the department."

Financial support was perceived as a strong indicator of the administration's honest effort toward creating a more positive environment and making the campus attractive to minority persons, raising the element of impartiality. One student, referring to her financial aid package, said, "This school gave me more money than any other. When you are competing for the same applicant pool as any other good school out there that would be a major factor in determining who comes." Financial backing was raised in reference to various efforts by the college toward meeting the goals of its affirmative action program. When asked how the college might implement its AA goals, one person said,

I think [the college] is doing a good job thus far. Not only are they pumping money into bringing candidates here, but incentive programs like the [graduate fellowships]—the real basis behind the program is to bring minority scholars into an environment like this where they typically would not consider coming

Accuracy was also raised in relation to the college's efforts. Respondents mentioned the promotion of all-campus activities, "There is an all-campus Race-Awareness Day attended by students and faculty each fall. I think this is a step in the right direction." Efforts organized towards education about the issues that are important to various minority groups promote sensitivity and awareness about how the attitudes and behavior of majority group members promote inclusion or exclusion of people who are different from them:

[The college] has tried to make [the change] easy and more comfortable for staff ... it used the consultant firm on human resources, to have workshops in which people have been sensitized about how they make the climate uncomfortable for people who are different from them, and what they can do about it personally to begin to change the climate.

Speaking about the minority women's lecture series, "what that kind of lecture series can do is help break myths, as well as give people a sense of different approaches that are taken." The same respondent further suggested that "it is important that senior faculty and administration attend these events because they are the ones that later make decisions, and they are better able to make decisions when they understand the population from which they are drawing upon."

There were cases where respondents' judgments seemed ambiguous. For example, the same person who said, "I got the sense that people were really listening to me, not just being polite . . . I was accepted as a person

and a colleague," also said, "If you hire a minority, people are going to question whether or not you're lowering your standards of excellence."

## DISCUSSION

The use of Tyler's theory as an analytic tool yielded interesting results about AA, but also shed light on Tyler's theory of procedural justice. We found that people care about justice; and that procedural justice judgments occur independently of outcomes. We also saw that elements of representation, consistency, impartiality, accuracy, correctability, and ethicality influence judgments of procedural justice. That the respondents' evaluations were identifiable in terms of the six justice elements speaks to the applicability of Tyler's theory. The salience of the commitment theme throughout the respondents' interviews is not specifically accounted for within the scope of the six elements. Frustration effects have been identified in cases when seemingly fair procedures produce unfair outcomes (Folger, 1977). The emphasis placed on commitment by the respondents in this study suggests that commitment may have a larger role than frustration effects explain.

The reported sense of lack of commitment by some respondents may be a factor in explaining the correspondingly high ratings of impartiality and ethicality in assessments of the practice of affirmative action. It seems plausible that if intended beneficiaries of AA judged the implementation as unfair regarding impartiality that ethicality issues could be implicated. If intended beneficiaries believe the effort is not honest, they may also believe they are not being considered respectfully.

That the element of consistency was not only raised by respondents in all contexts but was also the only element raised in assessment of all four conditions, warrants further examination. Clayton and Tangri (1989) identified the subtle differentiation between equality and sameness as a problem for some people in understanding affirmative action as fair. When minorities join an organization, standards for judging their contributions and those of the dominant group must be equal, but not identical. Historically, the value of contributions and their relevance to organizational settings has been defined by white males. To achieve inclusion of minorities, "relevance" must be redefined (and reassessed) according to the perspectives of all members of the group. Clayton and Tangri contend that inclusion does not occur by merely extending the boundaries to include other groups, but requires the recognition that relevant inputs may be different for members of different groups. Women's agility and their ability to crawl into small places may be as valuable to firefighting as men's strength. An

inclusive firefighting force recognizes the multiplicity of talents and requires that all members be equally talented but not identically talented. Clayton and Tangri's subtle differentiation between sameness and equality may explain why the element of consistency can cause confusion for people, and may shed light on the finding of respondents in the present study rating consistency as the most weighted element in describing what is fair about the practice of AA and simultaneously ranking it as one of the strongest elements in describing what is unfair about the practice of AA.

Closer analysis of seemingly conflictual assessments revealed that the apparent ambiguity arose when respondents were talking about the practice of AA in general, and the practice of AA as they personally experienced it. Respondents made more negative assessments of the practice of AA in the context of general observation, and more positive assessments in the contexts of personal experience.

This finding suggests that the respondents' experiences with the particular AA program under study have practical aspects which offer some solutions toward successful implementation of affirmative action. The respondents' comments generate information concerning very practical applications they perceive to be successful.

Our findings have obvious implications for any organization that intends to implement an affirmative action program. Beneficiaries can have good experiences, as did the women involved in this institution, even if they have doubts about how AA is usually implemented. For beneficiaries (and presumably everyone else) to have good experiences, attention must be paid to establishing fair procedures. Paying heed to the elements identified by Tyler, organizations can modify their practice of affirmative action facilitating a fairer, more balanced distribution of our society's resources, and in turn, enrich our society by promoting a climate where everyone can benefit from the diversity minority cultures have to offer. But while procedures are undoubtedly important, the respondents in this study have indicated that the procedures themselves are not divorced from the people involved in the system. There must be a commitment to the concept that the procedures address.

The pervasiveness of the issue of commitment indicates that further study toward understanding and quantification of commitment might prove valuable in broadening and deepening our understanding of procedural justice. One interpretation of commitment, especially relevant to this topic, is the notion of commitment as a willingness to persevere through a difficult process.

Because of the small, narrowly selected sample of the present study, it is inappropriate to generalize the findings to a broad test of procedural justice theory. However, the select nature of the respondents in this study,

as members of an historically disadvantaged group, offers a very specific perspective in terms of understanding affirmative action. A very different perspective, perhaps equally as insightful, might be gained by examining advantaged group members' reactions to changing established rules discovered to be unfair.

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