

## **Men's Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action: Justice and Intergroup Relations at the Crossroads**

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*Two studies were conducted to examine some factors that may motivate support of or opposition to affirmative action programs for women. In the first study, a sample of 96 French-speaking male managers and professionals were presented with one of three versions of an affirmative action program to benefit women in blue-collar jobs. The men were asked about their endorsements and beliefs about the program described to them and (using a neosexism scale) about sex equity. Results indicate that neosexist attitudes influence support of the program presented, and articulating adherence to a merit principle in affirmative action influences perceptions of fairness. The second study evaluated reactions to an affirmative action program targeting jobs similar to those of the participants. Four conditions were designed to determine which element or combinations of elements of information presented in the first merit condition might have a stronger impact on fairness evaluations. A total of 131 francophone male managers and professionals participated in this study. Results reveal that neosexist attitudes influence level of support for the program. Both neosexism and the four conditions had an impact on evaluations of fairness.*

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**KEY WORDS:** affirmative action; intergroup relations; sex equity.

In both Canada and the United States affirmative action has proven a controversial policy (Opatow, 1992; Tougas and Veilleux, 1990). Some people strongly endorse the policy, whereas others attack it with equal vehemence.

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Consequently, people's attitudes toward affirmative action provides a unique opportunity for examining the dynamics of justice in intergroup relations.

Part of the controversy may be semantic. The very words "affirmative action" may mean different things to different people (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1989; Noble and Winett, 1978; Smith and Crosby, in press). Among a random sample of residents of the Chicago area interviewed recently by the Northwestern University Survey Laboratory, for example, average citizens split on how to define affirmative action. Nearly half of the sample saw affirmative action as occurring "when an organization monitors itself to make sure that it employs and promotes qualified minorities and white women in proportion to their numbers," while 40% thought "affirmative action occurs when the government forces organizations to meet quotas for minorities and white women."

Nor is there consensus among experts. Some critics of affirmative action (e.g., Heilman, in press; Sowell, 1990; Steele, 1990, 1992) equate affirmative action with a quota system and assume that the policy permits, and even encourages, a lowering of standards. In contrast, proponents of affirmative action (e.g., Clayton and Crosby, 1992; Clayton and Tangri, 1989) argue that, if executed properly, the policy may raise standards because it enlarges the pool of available talent and encourages organizations to become thoughtful about what talents they need to utilize (Crosby and Blanchard, 1989; Ezorsky, 1991; Williams, 1991). Thus, although they appear to be at odds, both the opponents and the proponents of affirmative action may oppose the use of mindless quotas and may agree with each other about the fairness of a meritocracy.

Not every disagreement can be resolved through a clarification of terms. Sometimes real value differences are at stake. Indeed, removal of terminological ambiguities that surround affirmative action can serve to make all the more evident how various individuals differently situated in society, might respond in opposite ways to the very concept of affirmative action (Crosby, in press). To see why, consider how affirmative action works. Affirmative action requires organizations to utilize members of targeted group in proportion to their availability. If, through self-monitoring and active record keeping, an organization discovers that the percentage of white women or of people of color whom it employs is smaller than the percentage among the appropriately estimated talent pool, then the organization must take remedial actions.

Given the nature of affirmative action, it seems logical to assume that self-interest might affect people's attitudes toward this policy, and might specifically influence how people look at the process of matching utilization to availability. White males may feel threatened by the fact that they could

lose their advantaged position in organizations, while affirmative action may give hope to disadvantaged groups who—correctly or mistakenly—see themselves as talented but thwarted. If self-interest motivates people's attitudes, white men should be less enthusiastic about affirmative action than is any other group. Opinion surveys, and laboratory studies both show this to be the case (Heilman, in press; Tougas and Beaton, 1993; Tougas and Veilleux, 1991).

But certainly, self-interest does not account for all the variance in people's attitudes to affirmative action. Among whites and nonwhites, among men and women, there are ranges of attitudes about affirmative action. Something aside from self-interest must be influencing attitudes among the categories of people who stand to win or lose from the policy.

Racist and sexist beliefs are likely to influence attitudes about affirmative action. Research in this area has shown that in the last 20 years, these beliefs have undergone transformation (Dovidio *et al.*, 1989; Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986; Kahn and Crosby, 1984; Jacobson, 1985; McConahay, 1986; Tougas *et al.*, in press; Ward, 1985). It is argued though that this change affected the expression of racism and sexism rather than the beliefs *per se*. Racism and sexism still exist, but their expression has been modified to include current egalitarian values. As politically correct terms for prejudice change, the new sexists and new racists may couch their negative beliefs about people of color and women in the language of equality rather than the language of inferiority (Ward, 1985). Prejudice of this nature is embedded in egalitarian values, and as a result, more subtle and disguised than old-fashioned blatant prejudice (Kinder, 1986).

A number of studies have documented the presence of the new and subtle prejudice. Dovidio *et al.* (1989), for example, have shown that white college students who were reluctant to say that blacks were inferior to whites responded positively, nonetheless, to a question expressing the view that whites were superior to blacks. Furthermore, significant negative correlations have been found between support for affirmative action and these new forms of racism and sexism (Jacobson, 1985; Tougas *et al.*, in press).

Are there factors besides self-interest and prejudicial beliefs that account for people's opposition to or support of affirmative action? People have a need to believe in a just world (Lerner, 1980). Much of the rhetoric on both sides of the issue is framed in terms of fairness or justice (Clayton and Tangri, 1989; Jones, 1991; Jencks, 1985; Lipset and Schneider, 1978). Is the language nothing more than justification? Or is there reason to believe that genuine differences exist about whether or not affirmative action is fair?

Both laboratory and survey studies demonstrate that among various groups of people, fairness considerations are certainly part of the equation. White students who conceive of affirmative action programs as compen-

sating for inadequacies of individuals are less in favor of the policy than are those who see the programs as compensating for inadequacies in the system (Heilman and Herlihy, 1984). Similarly, minority graduate students have been found to endorse a specific affirmative action program at a large West Coast school because of the ways in which the program allowed them to demonstrate true merit (Ponterotto *et al.*, 1986). One fine-grained thematic analysis, focusing on the reactions of 13 women of color who had been associated with various affirmative action programs, found procedural justice concerns to be very salient (Ayers, 1992). Though they expressed reservations about how affirmative action operates in practice, the women endorsed the principle of affirmative action because they thought it was fair. The major reason for this opinion was that the women saw affirmative action as a means for truly consistent application of rules and procedures across individuals. Consistency, of course, figures prominently in Lind and Tyler's theory of procedural justice (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1990).

Finally, recent studies suggested that presenting information on women's disadvantaged status could lead men to react favorably to affirmative action (Tougas and Veilleux, 1989, 1990, 1991). Moreover, studies conducted by Crosby *et al.* (1986) and Twiss *et al.* (1989) gave indications as to how the disadvantaged situation of women should be introduced. In these studies, participants were included in one of two experimental conditions and asked whether discrimination existed in an organization. The first experimental condition consisted of statistics representing the organization's total labor force. In the second experimental condition, statistics for each department were introduced. Results showed a significant difference in the evaluation of discrimination according to the type of statistics presented. Participants identified more clearly and reliably women's discrimination in the first condition, where statistics depicted the organization's labor force.

## PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to examine the factors that motivate acceptance of, or resistance to, affirmative action programs when the programs stand clearly to benefit people of a different group than one's own. Specifically, using a sample of employed Canadians, we investigate the reactions of men to affirmative action for women. Our goal is to determine whether we can explain men's attitudes in terms of self-interest, prejudice, and/or genuine fairness concerns. We are also interested in evaluating the effects of different elements of information. We describe a hypothetical situation where women are underrepresented in certain job categories within an organization, and then describe the organizations' af-

firmative action response. There are three conditions, one of which is a control condition. In one of the experimental conditions, the materials stress the importance of merit; while in the other, they emphasize statistical information on women's disadvantage. We then measure the men's attitudes toward affirmative action and the extent of their sexist beliefs.

The design of our study allows for competing hypotheses. If raw self-interest is the only reason that men oppose affirmative action, then the men in our sample ought to disapprove of the program equally in the three conditions and their attitudes about affirmative action ought to bear no relation to sexism. Alternately, if opposition to affirmative action is nothing more than covert prejudice, then the men's attitudes toward affirmative action ought to be strongly related to their scores on the sexism scale, and their attitudes ought to be unaffected by the experimental manipulation. Next, if fairness concerns were the only factor involved in the men's views, then those men in the "merit condition" ought to display attitudes toward affirmative action that are much more favorable than men in the other conditions; there should be no association between affirmative action and prejudice; and evaluations of affirmative action ought to correlate with estimations of how fair the program is. The same line of reasoning applies to equality concerns, and the situation where statistics on the disadvantage of women are presented.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### *Participants*

Students in an introductory class in psychology at the University of Ottawa, Canada, were asked to give names of male professionals and managers willing to participate in a study dealing with some aspects of the work life. In all, 276 names were obtained. From this total, 96 were randomly chosen to participate in the study. Participants were all francophones, their age ranged from 23 to 62 years ( $\bar{X} = 41.0$ ), 84.8% completed postsecondary studies, and they averaged 20 years in the labor force.

#### *Questionnaire*

Participants received the materials in French, and a preaddressed, return envelope. All answers were recorded on 7-point scales where 1 indi-

cated total disagreement with the statement and 7 indicated total agreement with the statement. Where appropriate, scales were inverted to reflect the implied meaning of the variable label. The last section of the questionnaire gathered sociodemographic information such as participant's age and years spent in the labor market.

### *Experimental Manipulation*

Participants were invited to role-play a manager of a large city's transport commission. They were informed that the commission had conducted an analysis of its number of bus drivers and subway operators. The qualifications required to receive training as a driver and operator were described as minimal and according to official statistics, women should represent 15% of drivers and operators. To increase the number of women significantly, the commission implemented an affirmative action program. This program included numerical objectives. For example, 30% of new driver and operator positions would be offered to women until they represented 15% of the total number of workers in each job.

The final part of the scenario varied across the three conditions. In the control version, it was only mentioned that the analysis of the number of workers had shown that women were underrepresented. In the statistics version, a table listing the percentage of men and women in the two job categories was presented, so that women's disadvantage was emphasized. Finally, the merit version aimed to explain how the program's selection procedures would respect the merit principle. Participants were assured that (i) candidates will above all be selected on the basis of their competence through evaluation tests of performance during training sessions; (ii) candidates will not be chosen solely on the basis of their sex, rather the best candidate will be selected for the task, and (iii) women will be selected if they are among the best candidates.

Following the introduction of the situation, participants answered a question that verified whether they had read and understood the information. Next, they answered statements tapping the concepts presented in the following section. For each concept, a composite score was obtained by adding the responses and then dividing by the number of items, so the total score ranged from 1 to 7 for each scale.

### *Neosexism Scale*

The following statements were used to evaluate participants' neosexist attitudes: "Universities are wrong to admit women in costly programs such

as medicine, when in fact, a large number will leave their jobs after a few years to raise their children"; "Women should not put themselves where they are not wanted"; "It is difficult to work for a female boss"; "Over the past few years, women have got more from government than they deserve"; "Women will make more progress by being patient and not pushing too hard for change"; "Women's requests in terms of equality between the sexes are simply exaggerated"; "In a fair employment system, men and women would be considered equal"; "Discrimination against women in the labor force is no longer a problem in Canada"; and "Due to social pressures, firms frequently have to hire underqualified women." In the Tougas, *et al.* (in press) study, the coefficient of reliability of that scale measured by a test-retest was .83, and the Cronbach's alpha was .78. In the present study the Cronbach's alpha was somewhat lower at .68.

### *Dependent Measures*

*Support for the Program.* The three following questions were used to measure participants' attitudes toward the affirmative action program presented in the situation: "To what extent do you agree with this program?"; "To what extent do you agree with the program's goal?"; and "To what extent do you agree with measures taken to achieve this goal?" Cronbach's alpha was .82.

*Evaluated Fairness.* This part served to evaluate the fairness of the program presented. Participants were asked to indicate whether they believed that (i) the procedure used to reach the fixed goal is fair, (ii) this type of program permits the best candidates to be hired, either male or female, and (iii) this type of program opens doors to underqualified candidates. The last two items are related to the merit principle which is at the core of the debate on the fairness of affirmative action. Cronbach's alpha was .70.

## **Results**

### *Associations Among Scores*

Among the subjects, scores on the neosexism scale were negatively associated with support for the program presented ( $r = -.30, p < 0.01$ ) and with evaluations of fairness ( $r = -.17, p < 0.05$ ). Support for the program and evaluations of fairness were highly correlated ( $r = .67, p < 0.01$ ).

*Support for the Program*

To verify the effect of neosexist attitudes and of our manipulation on stated support, we conducted a 2 (High and Low Neosexism)  $\times$  3 (Condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with neosexism scores split at the median. The pattern of results for this analysis suggests that sexism mattered whereas conditions did not. The main effect for neosexist attitudes was significant  $F(1, 93) = 4.16, p < 0.05$ , with men ranking low on neosexist attitudes being more supportive of the program presented ( $\bar{x} = 6.12$ ) than men ranking high ( $\bar{x} = 5.49$ ). According to these results, when men expressed stronger neosexist attitudes they were less favorable of the program presented. There was no reliable main effect for condition and no interaction. Table I presents the means.

*Evaluated Fairness*

When evaluated fairness was the dependent measure, there was no main effect for attitudes and no interaction but there was a main effect for condition,  $F(2, 92) = 4.30, p < 0.05$ . A Scheffé test of multiple comparisons was performed, and results showed that the Merit condition differed significantly from both the Control, and the Statistics conditions. Means for the three conditions were 5.04, 4.15, and 4.22, respectively. Table I displays the mean scores of the evaluations of fairness for all of the cells.

Table I. Mean Scores on the Dependent Variables: Study 1<sup>a</sup>

Neosexism	Condition		
	Control	Merit	Statistics
Support for the program			
Low	5.64 (1.02)	5.83 (1.00)	6.24 (0.84)
High	5.30 (1.74)	5.47 (1.29)	5.19 (1.41)
Evaluated fairness			
Low	4.44 (1.28)	5.17 (1.17)	4.45 (1.78)
High	3.96 (1.47)	5.13 (1.46)	4.04 (1.57)

<sup>a</sup>Standard deviations in parentheses.



### Discussion

Despite the significant association between men's support for any particular affirmative action program and their evaluation of the program's fairness, the distribution of scores differed for the two dependent variables. How strongly men supported a program varied as a function of how sexist they were. How fair they perceived the program to be varied as a function of whether the description of the program stressed merit or not.

The first study gives no support for the contention that, in general, people's attitudes toward affirmative action is a matter of self-interest. Generally, the men had favorable attitudes overall toward the affirmative action program designed to help women, and they regarded the program as more fair than unfair. The study shows that prejudice plays a role as does evaluations of fairness. Among the sample and with the materials used, the influence of prejudice is not so overwhelming that neosexism contaminates evaluations of fairness. Conversely, while merit, as manipulated, affects perceptions of fairness, presenting affirmative action as a merit system does not result in especially high support for the program.

Results of Study 1 should, however, be interpreted cautiously. As Table I shows, support for affirmative action was generally high. The fact that the program targeted jobs different from those held by participants could perhaps explain why attitudes were generally positive.

Also worthy of further exploration is the effect of merit on perceived fairness. The men perceived the affirmative action program to be fairest when the materials stressed merit. But in the merit condition, the text discussed numerical goals and selection procedures as well as emphasizing that all candidates would be above criterion. It is not clear, therefore, whether an emphasis on merit alone would suffice to make people feel that an affirmative action program is fair, especially when the intended beneficiaries are members of another group than the self.

To determine the scope of the results obtained in the first study, and to assess the relevance of the questions raised, a second study was devised. This study differed from the first on two accounts. First, the affirmative action program presented targeted jobs similar to those held by the participants: The program was designed to benefit female managers and professionals. Second, three hypothetical situations were presented. In one condition, we stress the importance of merit; in the second, information on merit and the procedure used in the selection of female candidates was combined, and in the third, information on merit and numerical objectives was presented simultaneously.

## STUDY 2

### Method

#### *Participants*

The same procedure to recruit participants in the first study was used for the second study. In all, 242 names were obtained; 131 were randomly chosen to participate in the study. Participants were all francophones, their age ranged from 24 to 60 years ( $\bar{x} = 43.5$ ), 87.7% completed postsecondary studies, and they averaged 23 years in the labor force.

#### *Questionnaire*

As in the first experiment, participants received the materials in French, and a preaddressed, return envelope. All answers were recorded on 7-point scales where 1 indicated total disagreement with the statement and 7 indicated total agreement with the statement. Where appropriate, scales were inverted to reflect the implied meaning of the variable label. The last section of the questionnaire gathered sociodemographic information such as participant's age and years spent in the labor market.

#### *Experimental Manipulation*

Participants were invited to role-play a manager of a large Canadian company. They were informed that the company had conducted an analysis of its number of managers and professionals. The analysis had showed that women were underrepresented in management and professional positions. For example, women represented 3% (100) of managers, 15% (492) of professionals, and 5% (25) of engineers. They were informed that the company had implemented an affirmative action to increase women's representation. This program would give priority to female candidates in targeted categories of professionals and managers.

The final part of the scenario varied across the four conditions. In the control condition, the above information was presented. The merit condition added to the control condition information aimed to explain how the program's selection procedures would respect the merit principle. Participants were assured that (i) candidates will above all be selected on the basis of their competence through evaluation tests of performance during training sessions; (ii) candidates will not be chosen solely on the basis of their sex, rather the best candidate will be selected for the task, and (iii)

women will be selected if they are among the best candidates. The procedure condition added to the merit condition information on the procedure used to give priority to women. Participants were informed that given equal qualifications and experiences, priority would be given to female candidates in 50% of new jobs and 30% of promotions. In the last condition, final objectives, information about the numerical objectives was added to the merit condition. It was mentioned that at the end of the program, women should represent 10% of managers, 30% of professionals, and 13% of engineers as shown by the official statistics on the availability of women in the area.

Following the introduction of the situation, participants answered the same questions presented in the first experiment. Cronbach's alphas were .79 for the support of the program presented, .62 for evaluated fairness, and .76 for the neosexism scale. Here too, a composite score was obtained by adding the responses and dividing by the number of items, so the total score ranged from 1 to 7 for all scales.

## Results

### *Associations Among Scores*

Among the participants in our second study, scores on the neosexism scale were negatively associated with support for the program presented ( $r = -.46, p < 0.01$ ) and with evaluations of fairness ( $r = -.41, p < 0.01$ ). Support for the program and evaluations of fairness were highly correlated ( $r = .68, p < 0.01$ ).

### *Support for the Program*

To verify the effect of our manipulation and neosexist attitudes on support for the program, a 2 (Neosexist Attitudes)  $\times$  4 (Condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with median splits for neosexist attitudes were performed. The effect of neosexist attitudes (low vs. high) was statistically significant,  $F(1, 124) = 15.96, p < 0.001$ , with men ranking low in neosexist attitudes being more supportive of the program presented ( $\bar{x} = 5.66$ ) than men ranking high ( $\bar{x} = 4.68$ ). According to these results, when men expressed stronger neosexist attitudes, they were less favorable to the program presented. The means are presented in Table II.

Table II. Mean Scores on the Dependent Variables: Study 2<sup>a</sup>

Neosexism	Condition			Final objectives
	Control	Merit	Procedure	
Support for the program				
Low	5.25 (1.21)	6.02 (0.66)	5.87 (1.55)	5.64 (0.95)
High	4.59 (1.72)	5.19 (1.65)	4.13 (1.59)	4.70 (1.55)
Evaluated fairness				
Low	4.52 (1.45)	5.18 (0.94)	6.28 (0.80)	5.77 (1.13)
High	3.59 (1.64)	5.09 (1.60)	4.33 (1.44)	4.28 (1.57)

<sup>a</sup>Standard deviations in parentheses.

#### *Evaluated Fairness*

The second analysis of variance, indicated a significant interaction  $F(3, 125) = 2.60, p < 0.05$ . The analysis of the simple effects showed a significant difference in fairness evaluations for men who ranked low on the neosexism scale  $F(3, 60) = 7.02, p < 0.001$ . A Scheffé test of multiple comparisons was performed and results indicated that the information presented in the procedure and final objectives conditions had a significant impact on the evaluations of the fairness of the program presented. Participants with low neosexist scores in those conditions believed the program presented to be more fair ( $\bar{x}_{(\text{proced.})} = 6.28, \bar{x}_{(\text{final obj.})} = 5.77$ ) than those who were assigned to the control ( $\bar{x} = 4.52$ ) condition.

The analysis of the simple effects showed also a difference in the evaluations of fairness between men ranking high on the neosexism scale and those ranking low for the procedure  $F(1, 27) = 18.77, p < 0.001$ , and the final objectives  $F(1, 30) = 8.51, p < 0.01$ , conditions. In both cases, men who ranked low on the neosexism scale evaluated the program more positively than men who ranked high.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the Study 2 show, even more strongly than the Study 1, the importance of prejudice in men's attitudes toward affirmative action programs that directly benefit women. At least when they encounter ex-

perimentally prepared materials, men who rank low on the neosexism scale support affirmative action more strongly than do men who score high. Furthermore, it is among men who are less sexist that information has the greatest impact. It seems that when explanations do not fall on deaf ears, they have a potential for shaping attitudes.

One implication of the present study is that resistance to affirmative action is at least partially motivated by sexism. As Jacobson (1985) and Dovidio *et al.* (1989) have contended, opposition to affirmative action may be one currently acceptable way to express prejudices that are no longer condoned in the mainstream of North American society.

Does this mean that any opposition to affirmative action is the result of bigotry? Obviously not! For one thing, the data refer to averages and do not, therefore, describe with perfect accuracy any individual. To demonstrate, furthermore, that prejudice may be a sufficient precondition for negative attitudes toward affirmative action is not to show that it is a necessary precondition. Certainly, there may be a host of reasons—including experiences with unfair programs—why any one individual would be cautious about affirmative action.

While our demonstration of the influence of prejudice in one situation does not settle the issue, our findings should be taken as justification of further studies on the topic. Future researchers might examine the association between prejudice and attitudes toward the general policy of affirmative action and toward specific programs. Those interested in social change, furthermore, may seek to pinpoint where, along the continuum of open-mindedness and prejudice, individuals are open to arguments about the justice or injustice of various affirmative action programs. With continued efforts, progress—in the form of support for well-constructed affirmative action programs, and recognition of the contributions of all members of the work force—should be made.

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