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# Attitudes and perceptions toward affirmative action programs: An application of institutional theory



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## ABSTRACT

Due to the continuing controversy surrounding the use of affirmative action programs in organizational hiring and promotion practices, we conducted a study to model individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions toward affirmative action (AA) programs considering social influences and an institutional theory framework. To conduct the study we surveyed 413 managers and supervisors from three large hotel companies in the Pacific Western and Southeastern United States. Results indicate that institutional and social forces positively influenced participants' general perceptions of AA in the workplace. Influences from social interaction exhibited a negative relationship upon attitudes toward the experience and practice of AA, specifically related to AA hires and organizational issues stemming from AA rather than the legislation itself.

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## 1. Introduction

Affirmative action has long been the focus of debate among political, organizational, and social entities (Heilman et al., 1992; Kravitz and Platania, 1993; Parker et al., 1997). Affirmative action (AA) is a series of activities conducted by an organization that applies resources to eliminate or prevent discrimination from occurring in the workplace among protected classes (i.e., gender, ethnic minorities; Crosby et al., 2006; Leslie et al., forthcoming). Affirmative action is similar to Equal Opportunity, but differs because Equal Opportunity (EO) is reactive; when discrimination is identified, EO actions attempt to remove it (Crosby et al., 2006). Affirmative action comes about through actions, policies, and procedures put in place to prevent discrimination from occurring in the

first place (Crosby et al., 2006; Leslie et al., forthcoming). Harrison et al. (2006) identified four structural features of research on AA in ascending order of prescriptiveness (that is the degree to which the AA action limits the discretion of the decision makers): (a) *opportunity enhancement* – uses focused recruitment and training to improve/enhance hiring pools with target group members; (b) *equal opportunity* – as noted above, is designed to eliminate existing discrimination by preventing target group members from being negatively evaluated; (c) *tiebreak* – gives preferential treatment to target group members over non-target members if they are equally qualified, and (d) *strong preferential treatment* – gives preference to target group members even if they are less qualified than non-target members. Based on this framework – through their meta-analysis – they found that prescriptiveness negatively affected individuals' perceptions of AA (Harrison et al., 2006), showing as organizations increase their efforts with AA that limit decision makers' authority, negative affective toward AA becomes stronger.

Affirmative action continues to generate a broad range of attention in the organizationally based literature in terms of its utility in organizational practices and procedures and its influence upon organizations, their environments, and their members. Investigations into the presence and influence of AA in organizations have

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examined: (a) the historical and legal aspects of AA programs (Crosby et al., 2006; Kleiman and Faley, 1988; Robinson et al., 1992), (b) the social psychological implications of AA programs (Aquino et al., 2005; Braddock and McPartland, 1987; Caprariello et al., 2009; Fine, 1992; Kaley et al., 2006; Nacoste, 1987), (c) the implications of individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of coworkers and self as influenced by AA programs (Harrison et al., 2006; Heilman et al., 1987, 1991, 1992, 1996; Heilman and Herlihy, 1984; Kravitz and Platania, 1993; Leslie et al., forthcoming; Parker et al., 1997; Shteynberg et al., 2011), and (d) the value or cost of adding diversity to the organization (Kaley et al., 2006; Leslie et al., forthcoming; Niederle et al., 2013).

While these investigations have clearly heightened our understanding of the presence and influence of AA in the workplace, the extent to which workers' perceptions and attitudes toward AA are influenced by broader-based institutional or social influences appears to be insufficiently studied in the literature on organizations. Our goal in this paper is to build on the existing organizational literature that examines AA and to examine the extent to which institutional and social forces are connected to attitudes about AA in the workplace. To that end, we will begin with a description of the relevant literature addressing AA and discuss the broader factors of institutional theory and social influence as it relates to AA. Ultimately, we will demonstrate that both institutional and social influences are connected to hotel managers' perceptions of AA.

An *institutional* theoretical framework suggests that perceptions of organizational experiences, either in terms of organizational structure or discrete organizational phenomena, become rationalized through repeated exposure in a given organizational domain and influence individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and actions (Drori and Honig, 2013; Scott, 1987; MacLean and Behnam, 2010; Sourouklis and Tsagdis, 2013; Weaver et al., 2003). Therefore, organizational actions and behaviors are conjointly influenced by extra-organizational factors and the extent to which they are legitimated in a given domain (Dacin et al., 2010; Doherty and Manfredi, 2001; Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). Institutional influences, in part, determine how individuals interpret and process elements of their surrounding environment.

Affirmative action is a phenomenon that is particularly well suited to examination in terms of institutional forces upon individuals' perceptions and attitudes in organizational settings (Sourouklis and Tsagdis, 2013). Specifically, AA is rooted in legal-political actions which have been rationalized to remedy insufficient ethnic- and sex-based representation in the workforce (Crosby et al., 2006; Nacoste, 1994) identified by the forces regulating organizational action and behavior (e.g., hiring and promotion practices). Kaley et al. (2006) demonstrated that a formal responsibility structure in place for AA was connected to program effectiveness, showing that broader institutional influences can be made legitimate and deemed useful by an organization.

Gender and race discrimination in recruiting, hiring, performance evaluations, advancement, and disciplinary actions within the hospitality realm are still present. Slonaker et al. (2007) compiled a database from the Ohio Civil Rights Commission's employment discrimination claims, and the data analysis showed that approximately 5% of all claims were filed from within the restaurant industry. The two most common types of discrimination claims are those based on race and gender (Slonaker et al., 2007). In 2008, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received more than 30,000 race discrimination cases (*Human Resources Issues in the Hotel Industry*, <http://hubpages.com/hub/Human-Resources-Issues-in-the-Hotel-Industry>). Considering the fact that the hospitality industry accounted for approximately one-third of the number of charges reported by the EEOC in 2009, the issue of discrimination in the workplace is still important to further explore, and it leads to challenges for hospitality human resource

managers in hiring and promotion practices. Despite the importance of eliminating workplace discrimination, limited research has been conducted on the subject in the hospitality industry. The most prevalent hospitality research deals with the practical aspects of discrimination, such as the analysis of employment discrimination claims (Slonaker et al., 2007) and arbitration of employment discrimination lawsuits (Sherwyn, 2002).

Gröschl and Doherty (1999) examined ethnic minority policies at hotels in San Francisco, California. Their qualitative study gathered data via questionnaires and interviews from seven human resources directors at hotels identified as having the "best" diversity policies. A key finding of the research was that most human resources (HR) managers come from the operational side of the business, demonstrating a profit and production mindset rather than a strategic one. Consequently, most HR managers do not spend adequate time strategically managing diversity beyond the point that law requires it. This includes AA policies, which encourage diversity but fail to deal with prejudice, inequality, and the development of talent. The article concludes that hotels should be more proactive in not only tolerating diversity, but valuing it. This conclusion connects to our work here in that to better manage diversity in the workplace; you need to understand how policies and procedures influence the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of organizational members affected by the policies (Weaver et al., 2003). This is also consistent with the findings of Shteynberg et al. (2011) who found that race-based AA in organizations led to perceptions of racism among Caucasians, which was then connected to their perceptions of unfairness in hiring and promotion practices in the organization.

Through their analyses of claims recorded by the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, Slonaker et al. (2007) reported and described several characteristics of these claims with regards to the hospitality industry. Five major findings from their analyses include: (1) a classification of the nature of discrimination claims by each of the four types of restaurants examined (i.e., national or regional quick service, by national or regional full service, local quick service, and local full service); (2) race claims by African Americans are three times disproportionate to their industry representation; (3) sexual harassment is claimed at a 69 percent higher rate in restaurants than in any other industry; (4) restaurant claimants face higher termination rates when claiming discrimination; and (5) claimants most frequently name their frontline supervisor as the cause of the discrimination. Based upon the findings, the researchers recommend corporations adapt their workplace cultures to be more diverse and thereby reduce discrimination claims. Additionally, they note that when individual (one instance/individual) discrimination turns into systemic (multiple instances/individuals) discrimination, government intervention and forced "assistance" will occur and could possibly negatively impact the company's business objectives, which is more reactive (like EO) than proactive (like AA). As noted above, Kaley et al. (2006) found that having a formal organizational responsibility structure in place for AA had a stronger effect on program success. They further note that efforts for training and development of staff would likely be more successful within that said responsibility structure. It is important to reiterate that AA is intended to increase the ability of target groups to succeed in the workplace (Leslie et al., forthcoming).

Pinar et al. (2011) focused on gender differences in the Turkish hotel industry. A survey method was employed with a random sampling of associates at hotels. The analysis indicated that a "gender effect" exists in relation to education level and department, but not job position and age. Additionally, results indicate a gender difference in associate pay as well as gender segregation based upon the recruiter's gender (i.e., a female recruiter will offer a female a higher salary than a male recruiter would). Managerial

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