



## It's fair for us: Diversity structures cause women to legitimize discrimination <sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- The mere presence of diversity structures shapes women's reasoning about justice.
- Diversity structures cause women to perceive organizations as procedurally fair.
- Diversity structures cause women to perceive sexist outcomes as justified.
- Diversity structures can ironically make it more difficult to remedy injustice.
- Diversity structures' effects are larger among women high in benevolent sexism.

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### ABSTRACT

Three experiments tested the hypothesis that the mere presence (vs. absence) of diversity structures makes it more difficult for women to detect sexism. In Experiment 1, even when a company's hiring decisions disadvantaged women, women perceived the company as more procedurally just for women and were less supportive of sexism litigation when the company offered diversity training, compared to when it did not. In Experiment 2, women perceived a company as more procedurally just for women and as less likely to have engaged in sexism when the company offered diversity training, compared to when it did not. This effect was not moderated by women's endorsement of status legitimizing beliefs. In Experiment 3, women perceived a company as more procedurally just and less discriminatory when the company had been recognized for positive gender diversity practices compared to when it had not. Additionally, these effects were most pronounced among women who endorsed benevolent sexist beliefs and mitigated among those who rejected benevolent sexist beliefs. Together, these experiments demonstrate that diversity structures can make it difficult for women to detect and remedy discrimination, especially women who hold benevolent sexist beliefs.

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### Introduction

As concerns about the treatment of legally protected groups (e.g., women, older employees, and minorities) remain prominent in American workplaces, many corporations have responded by implementing diversity structures (Dobbin, 2009; Kelly & Dobbin, 1998; Paluck, 2006). These structures take various forms such as diversity policies, diversity training programs, and affirmative action initiatives, but all profess to create equal opportunities and treatment for all employees (Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Dittra, 2001; Paluck, 2006).

Empirical research, however, suggests that diversity structures often fail to achieve these egalitarian objectives, and many commonly employed diversity structures have little to no impact on increasing diversity (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). Despite the limited efficacy of many diversity structures, recent research shows that high status group members, such as White men, believe that the presence of diversity structures—even demonstrably ineffective diversity structures—signifies that organizations are indeed fair for underrepresented groups (Kaiser et al., 2013). That is, diversity structures create an *illusion of fairness*.

*Diversity structures create an illusion of fairness among high status groups*

In a series of studies, Kaiser et al. (2013) examined whether members of high status groups perceive companies with diversity structures as fairer for members of legally protected groups than companies without such structures, and whether they do so even when there is

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objective evidence that the companies' procedures unfairly disadvantage these groups. Across these studies, high status group members (i.e., Whites and men) were exposed to a company's diversity structure (e.g., diversity statement, diversity training program, or diversity award) or control structure (e.g., general mission statement, general management training program, or award for non-diversity related achievements). Those who viewed a diversity structure believed that the company was less discriminatory and more procedurally just for underrepresented groups, even when they were given evidence that the company had acted unfairly (e.g., promoted more Whites than minorities, interviewed more men than equally qualified women, or paid men more than equally qualified women). This perception of procedural justice, or the belief that employees are valued and subjected to fair, neutral and consistent procedures (e.g., Colquitt, 2001; Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), led high status groups to perceive less discrimination against underrepresented groups when diversity structures were present.

The finding that diversity structures cause high status groups to perceive organizations as fair and to overlook discrimination against low status groups converges with theoretical perspectives on legitimacy (Lind & Tyler, 1988). When forming opinions about the legitimacy of institutions and authorities, people are often more persuaded by the presence of seemingly fair procedures than by the outcomes of these procedures (Tyler, 2001). Similarly, because people are motivated to perceive their social systems as fair and legitimate, especially when their group resides at the top of those systems, they often overlook negative or unfair outcomes of these systems (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that high status group members are so easily persuaded that diversity structures are effective approaches to creating equality in the workplace.

#### *Group status and the illusion of fairness*

Less is known, however, about how diversity structures shape the perceptions of low status groups (e.g., minorities and women), the intended beneficiaries of diversity structures. In comparison to high status groups, low status groups may be more concerned about potential negative outcomes for their groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and therefore less persuaded that the mere presence of a diversity structure proves that their group is treated fairly. Low status groups' previous experiences as targets of discrimination may also raise suspicion about the motives of high status groups, causing low status groups to be more vigilant in detecting discrimination compared to high status groups (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989; Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2006; Major & Kaiser, 2006; Major et al., 2013). Indeed, compared to Whites, minorities tend to be more attentive to their groups' representation and opportunities when forming opinions about a company and its commitment to diversity (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008; Unzueta & Binning, 2011). Although this research would suggest that minorities might *not* fall victim to the illusion of fairness, decades of research in legitimization demonstrate that low status groups are not immune to legitimizing unfair systems, even when those systems disadvantage their groups (Dasgupta, 2004; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Major, 1994; Major & Schmader, 2001). Furthermore, low status groups may be particularly likely to legitimize unfair systems when they perceive those systems as having fair procedures (Tyler, 2001).

Indeed, in one study (Dover, Major, & Kaiser, 2014), Latino participants viewed a company that had won either diversity related awards (e.g., "Top 50 Company for Latino Diversity") or neutral awards unrelated to diversity (e.g., "Leader in Service") and subsequently evaluated a Latino employee's discrimination lawsuit against the company. Latino participants perceived the company that had won a diversity award as fairer for Latinos than a company that had won an award unrelated to diversity, but this effect was moderated by participants' endorsement

of status legitimizing beliefs (SLBs; e.g., the belief that those who work hard succeed, that people can get ahead in society regardless of group membership, and that status differences between groups are justified; O'Brien & Major, 2005). Latinos who were strong (1 *SD* above the mean) in endorsement of SLBs perceived the company that had received diversity-related awards as more fair for Latinos compared to a company without diversity-related awards, but Latinos who rejected SLBs (1 *SD* below the mean) did not show this effect. SLBs also moderated the extent to which Latinos derogated the Latino who filed the lawsuit. Those who endorsed SLBs derogated the claimant more in the diversity condition compared to the control condition, but those who rejected SLBs did not show this effect. This study provides initial evidence that like high status group members, some low status group members perceive companies with diversity structures as inherently fairer for underrepresented groups and regard discrimination claims by members of those groups against those companies as less justifiable. Further, endorsement of SLBs may be important in understanding some low status groups' responses to diversity.

Dover et al. (2014) provided an important initial demonstration of variability in low status group members' reactions to diversity structures and inspired the current research, which sought to extend these findings in significant ways. First, Dover et al. (2014) used a particularly strong diversity structure manipulation; the company had been recognized with an award for diversity. Participants may readily infer that companies with diversity awards are actually successful in increasing diversity and treating minorities fairly. In contrast, the current studies examined the impact of the presence or absence of diversity training on low status group members' responses to potential discrimination against their group. Given that diversity training is ubiquitous in U.S. organizations (Dobbin, 2009), it may be less likely than an award to be intuitively linked with actual success in diversity management. Indeed, diversity training does not increase minority representation in management, nor does it reduce bias (see Dobbin, 2009).

Second, Dover et al. (2014) did not provide participants with any information about the actual fairness of the organization. Consequently, Latinos may have been particularly susceptible to perceiving organizations with diversity awards as fair. In contrast, in Experiment 1 of the current research, participants were shown clear evidence that an organization had engaged in discrimination. This allowed for a more stringent test of the hypothesis that diversity structures reduce low status group members' sensitivity to discrimination; that is, create an illusion of fairness among low status group members.

Third, Dover et al. (2014) report a single study with a relatively small sample of Latinos. The present paper presents three unique studies, each with multiple variables and larger samples, which can provide a stronger foundation for understanding how low status groups respond to organizations that tout their diversity structures.

Fourth, although psychologists often seek to describe the attitudes and behaviors of low status groups in general, these groups vary tremendously with respect to their historical and contemporary positions in society, their relationships with higher status groups, and the particular circumstances surrounding their oppression. These differences undoubtedly shape how low status groups perceive and react to inequality (Jackman, 1994; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Sidanius & Veniegas, 2000). We believe that rather than assume that the responses of one low status group inevitably characterize the responses of all low status groups, it is important to empirically investigate generalizability.

Some scholars, for example, have suggested that compared to racial minorities, women are less likely to perceive discrimination against their group or themselves (Higginbotham & Webber, 1999) and do less publicly and privately to combat their disadvantage (Jackman, 1994). Women's relative lack of opposition to their disadvantaged status may stem from the unique nature of the relationships men and women have with each other compared to minorities and Whites (Gurin, 1985). Specifically, women and men are unusually deeply

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