

10 Myths About Affirmative Action

By Sue Nelmes

The following a series of articles about affirmative action. All are drawn from a chapter by Scott Plous, in the book *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*. In his "Ten Myths about Affirmative Action" Plous writes,

"In recent years, affirmative action has been debated more intensely than at any other time in its 35-year history. Many supporters view affirmative actions as a milestone, many opponents see it as a millstone, and many others regard it as both or neither - as a necessary, but imperfect, remedy for an intractable social disease. My own view is that the case against affirmative action is weak, resting as it does so heavily, on myth and misunderstanding."

Myth 1: The only way to create a color-blind society is to adopt color-blind policies.

Although this statement sounds intuitively plausible, the reality is that color-blind policies often put racial minorities at a disadvantage. For instance, all else being equal, color-blind seniority systems tend to protect White workers against job layoffs, because senior employees are usually White (Ezorsky, 1991). Likewise, color-blind college admissions favor White students because of their earlier educational advantages. Unless preexisting inequities are corrected or otherwise taken into account, color-blind policies do not correct racial injustice - they reinforce it."

Myth 2: Affirmative action has not succeeded in increasing female and minority representation.

Several studies have documented important gains in racial and gender equality as a direct result of affirmative action (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Murrell & Jones, 1996). For example, according to a report from the U.S. Labor Department, affirmative action has helped 5 million minority members and 6 million white and minority women move up in the workforce ("Reverse Discrimination," 1995). Likewise, a study sponsored by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs showed that between 1974 and 1980 federal contractors (who were required to adopt affirmative action goals) added black and female officials and managers at twice the rate of non-contractors (Citizens' Commission, 1984). There have also been a number of well-publicized cases in which large companies (e.g., AT&T, IBM, Sears Roebuck) increased minority employment as a result of adopting affirmative action policies."

"Myth 3: Affirmative action may have been necessary 30 years ago, but the playing field is fairly level today.

Despite the progress that has been made, the playing field is far from level. Women continue to earn 76 cents for every male dollar (Bowler, 1999). Black people continue to have twice the unemployment rate of White people, twice the rate of infant mortality, and just over half the proportion of people who attend four years or more of college. In fact, without affirmative action the percentage of Black students at many selective schools would drop to only 2% of the student body (Bowen & Bok, 1998). This would effectively choke off Black access to top universities and severely restrict progress toward racial equality."

“Myth 4: The public doesn’t support affirmative action anymore.

Public opinion polls suggest that the majority of Americans support affirmative action, especially when the polls avoid an all-or-none choice between affirmative action as it currently exists and no affirmative action whatsoever (see Table 1). For example, a Time/CNN poll found that 80% of the public felt that “affirmative action programs for minorities and women should be continued at some level” (Roper Center for Public Opinion, 1995a). What the public opposes are quotas, set-asides, and “reverse discrimination.” For instance, when the same poll asked people whether they favored programs “requiring businesses to hire a specific number or quota of minorities and women,” 63% opposed such a plan (Roper Center for Public Opinion, 1995b). As these results indicate, most members of the public oppose racial preferences that violate notions of procedural justice - they do not oppose affirmative action.”

“Myth 5: A large percentage of White workers will lose out if affirmative action is continued.”

Government statistics do not support this myth. According to the U.S. Commerce Department there are 1.3 million unemployed Black civilians and 112 million employed White civilians (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Thus, even if every unemployed Black worker in the United States were to displace a White worker, only 1% of Whites would be affected. Furthermore, affirmative action pertains only to job-qualified applicants, so the actual percentage of affected Whites would be a fraction of 1%. The main sources of job loss among White workers have to do with factory relocations and labor contracting outside the United States, computerization and automation, and corporate downsizing (Ivins, 1995).

Myth 6: If Jewish people and Asian Americans can rapidly advance economically, African Americans should be able to do the same.

This comparison ignores the unique history of discrimination against Black people in America. As historian Roger Wilkins has pointed out, Blacks have a 375-year history on this continent: 245 involving slavery, 100 involving legalized discrimination, and only 30 involving anything else (Wilkins, 1995). Jews and Asians, on the other hand, are populations that immigrated to North America and included doctors, lawyers, professors and entrepreneurs among their ranks. Moreover, European Jews are able to function as part of the White majority. To expect Blacks to show the same upward mobility as Jews and Asians is to deny the historical and social reality that Black people face.

“Myth 7: You can’t cure discrimination with discrimination.

The problem with this myth is that it uses the same word - discrimination - to describe two very different things. Job discrimination is grounded in prejudice and exclusion, whereas affirmative action is an effort to overcome prejudicial treatment through inclusion. The most effective way to cure society of exclusionary practices is to make special efforts at inclusion, which is exactly what affirmative action does. The logic of affirmative action is no different than

the logic of treating a nutritional deficiency with vitamin supplements. For a healthy person, high doses of vitamin supplements may be unnecessary or even harmful, but for a person whose system is out of balance, supplements are an efficient way to restore the body's balance.

"Myth 8: Affirmative action tends to undermine the self-esteem of women and racial minorities."

Although affirmative action may have this effect in some cases (Heilman, Simon, & Repper, 1987; Steele, 1990), interview studies and public opinion surveys suggest that such reactions are rare (Taylor, 1994). For instance, a 1995 Gallup poll asked employed Blacks and employed White women whether they had ever felt others questioned their abilities because of affirmative action (Roper Center for Public Opinion, 1995d). Nearly 90% of respondents said no (which is understandable-after all, White men, who have traditionally benefited from preferential hiring, do not feel hampered by self-doubt or a loss in self-esteem). Indeed, in many cases affirmative action may actually raise the self-esteem of women and minorities by providing them with employment and opportunities for advancement. There is also evidence that affirmative action policies increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment among beneficiaries (Graves&Powell, 1994).

Myth 9: "Affirmative action is nothing more than an attempt at social engineering by liberal Democrats."

In truth, affirmative action programs have spanned nine different presidential administrations - six Republican and three Democratic. Although the originating document of affirmative action was President Lyndon Johnson's Executive Order 11246, the policy was significantly expanded in 1969 by President Richard Nixon and then Secretary of Labor George Schultz. President George Bush also enthusiastically signed the Civil Rights Act of 1991, which formally endorsed the principle of affirmative action. Thus, affirmative action has traditionally enjoyed the support of Republicans as well as Democrats.

Part 10

By Sue Nelmes

The following is the final myth in a series of articles about affirmative action. All are drawn from a chapter by Scott Plous, in a book entitled Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination.

"Myth 10: "Support for affirmative action means support for preferential selection procedures that favor unqualified candidates over qualified candidates."

Actually, most supporters of affirmative action oppose this type of preferential selection. Preferential selection procedures can be ordered along the following continuum:

1. Selection among equally qualified candidates. The mildest form of affirmative action selection occurs when a female or minority candidate is chosen from a pool of equally qualified applicants (e.g., students with identical college entrance scores). Survey research suggests that three-quarters of the public does not see this type of affirmative action as discriminatory (Roper Center for Public Opinion,

1995e).

2. Selection among comparable candidates. A somewhat stronger form occurs when female or minority candidates are roughly comparable to other candidates (e.g., their college entrance scores are lower, but not by a significant amount). The logic here is similar to the logic of selecting among equally qualified candidates; all that is needed is an understanding that, for example, predictions based on an SAT score of 620 are virtually indistinguishable from prediction based on an SAT score of 630.

3. Selection among unequal candidates. A still stronger form of affirmative action occurs when qualified female or minority candidates are chosen over candidates whose records are better by a substantial amount.

4. Selection among qualified and unqualified candidates. The strongest form of preferential selection occurs when unqualified female or minority members are chosen over other candidates who are qualified. Although affirmative action is sometimes mistakenly equated with this form of preferential treatment, federal regulations explicitly prohibit affirmative action programs in which unqualified or unneeded employees are hired (Bureau of National Affairs, 1979).

Even though these selection procedures occasionally blend into one another (due in part to the difficulty of comparing incommensurable records), a few general observations can be made. First, of the four different procedures, the selection of women and minority members among equal or roughly comparable candidates has the greatest public support, adheres most closely to popular conceptions of fairness, and reduces the chances that affirmative action beneficiaries will be perceived as unqualified or undeserving (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Nacoste, 1985; Turner & Pratkanis, 1994). Second, the selection of women and minority members among unequal candidates - used routinely in college admissions - has deeply divided the nation (with the strongest opposition coming from white males and conservative voters.) And finally, the selection of unqualified candidates is not permitted under federal affirmative action guidelines and should not be equated with legal forms of affirmative action. By distinguishing among these four different selection procedures, it becomes clear that opposition to stronger selection procedures need not imply opposition to milder ones. Some writers have criticized affirmative action as a superficial solution that does not address deeper societal problems by redistributing wealth and developing true educational equality. Yet affirmative action was never proposed as a cure-all solution to inequality. Rather, it was intended only to redress discrimination in hiring and academic admissions. In assessing the value of affirmative action, the central question is merely this: In the absence of sweeping societal reforms - unlikely to take place any time soon - does affirmative action help counteract the continuing injustice caused by discrimination? The research record suggests, unequivocally, that it does.