Message Effects on the Perceptions of the Fairness of Gender-Based Affirmative Action: A Cognitive Response Theory-Based Analysis

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The controversy surrounding the implementation of affirmative action interventions in organizations underscores the importance of understanding fairness perceptions of such policies. There is a need for research on the variables which influence evaluations of affirmative action policies and on whether the content of organizational communications can alter these evaluations. The present study was designed to investigate the effects of proaffirmative action and antiaffirmative action communications on fairness evaluations. Cognitive response theory was used as a framework for predicting reactions to pro- and antipreferential treatment messages and subsequent fairness perceptions. While the results indicated that cognitive responses added to the prediction of fairness judgments, initial attitude, and message content also had strong effects on the fairness judgments.

KEY WORDS: affirmative action; fairness perception; preferential treatment.

Women remain underrepresented in many occupations and segregated in others. In response to this gender imbalance, organizations have continued to search for methods of increasing diversity among their work forces, including the use of affirmative action in hiring and promotion. While affirmative action may result in benefits to women by increasing their representation in occupations, paradoxically, it may also result in negative reactions from the potential or intended beneficiaries (Austin et al., 1977;
Chako, 1982; Garcia et al., 1981; Heilman and Herlihy, 1984; Heilman et al., 1990, 1991, 1987; Nacoste, 1985, 1987a, 1987b, 1989). That is, both anecdotal and research evidence suggest that the intended beneficiaries of affirmative action may have to deal with negative self-evaluations and self-perceptions as well as with negative reactions from nonbeneficiaries.

Despite the possibility of resistance to affirmative action policies from beneficiaries, relatively little is known about the processes which influence fairness perceptions nor about the ways in which communications, especially messages from the organization, may shape perceptions. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of these messages on the perceptions of gender-based affirmative action by women. This investigation was carried out within the theoretical context of cognitive response theory, which hypothesizes that reactions to communications are affected by self-generated cognitive responses.

Types of Affirmative Action

Differentiating between alternate forms of affirmative action is important, since fairness perceptions of affirmative action depend on the policy's relative emphasis on gender and qualifications (Nacoste, 1985). Seligman (1975) has provided a four-category scheme for distinguishing among affirmative action policies. The two categories of weaker policies, passive nondiscrimination and recruiting, do not involve explicit inclusion of group membership as a factor in selection decisions. The remaining two stronger policies, soft and hard preferential treatment, consider group membership as an important factor in selection decisions. In "soft" preferential treatment, group membership would only be a consideration in hiring decisions when applicants are roughly equal in their qualification level. In contrast, "hard" preferential treatment dictates that as long as the underrepresented applicant meets the minimum qualifications for a position, they will be offered the job. In the present study, we have concentrated our attention on the soft preferential treatment form of affirmative action.

Reactions of Intended Beneficiaries

Laboratory and survey studies have shown that even soft forms of gender-based preferential treatment may lead to negative reactions (Taylor, 1990). For example, in a pilot study completed as part of the present study, 59% of the men and 41% of the women viewed soft preferential treatment based on gender as unfair (Taylor, 1990). In addition, selection based on affirmative action rather than merit has been shown to lead to negative