Affirmative action has not been enjoying widespread support in the United States. This commentary addresses the issues of why the policy of affirmative action is not supported by some Americans. Equity and equality are values cherished by many Americans. Affirmative action as a means toward equality is seen as at odds with the principle of equity and meritocracy. At the center of the problem is a "sense of fairness." Two issues may be involved in the judgment of fairness of affirmative action programs: (1) heightened salience of group identity and differences and (2) perceived scarcity of resources. Action programs can be designed to address the issue of functional integration, therefore reducing the salience of group differences. It is proposed that workforce diversity should be seen as a viable means toward economic expansion, which will help address the issue of scarcity.

Affirmative action is perhaps one of the most controversial policies in recent U.S. history. Growing out of the 1970s' heightened awareness of civil rights of peoples who are "different," the policy has not been enjoying widespread support in the U.S. (Kleugel & Smith, 1986; Lerner, 1980). Americans seem to agree with an abstract principle of "equality" but found the actual practice difficult to accept (Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985). Affirmative action is a general policy, the operationalization of which seems to differ from organization to organization. A common threat in all of the affirmative action programs seems to focus on giving the "others," peoples who are traditionally underrepresented in "privileged" areas of society, education, employment, and public service opportunities. Both the conceptualization and the implementation of the policy are based on perceived or real group identities or differences.

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Rokeach and Ball-Rokeach (1988) observed that the priorities Americans assign to equality, the central value behind affirmative action policies, as a terminal value, a preferred state of existence (Rokeach, 1973), fell throughout the 1970s. A direct causal link is difficult to establish but it seems that since the implementation of policies to “address past inequality,” public endorsement of equality as a desirable state seems to have been eroded. It appears that Americans do value equality as a principle but that social equality, enforced through programs such as affirmative action, is seen to be at odds with other principles, such as meritocracy or fair competition—values highly cherished by the average American as the core spirit of the culture (De Tocqueville, 1835/1969). In other words, equality is seen to have come at the expense of equity (Adams, 1963), which is found to be a favored principle in distributing of wealth and resources in the United States. At the heart of the matter seems to be a value conflict between equality and equity and the resulting sense of “fairness.”

Peterson (1994) explored the intricate relationship between perceived “fairness” and the value paradox between equality and meritocracy. Supported by empirical data and LISREL modeling, Peterson suggested that the perceived fairness would be the crucial factor in determining whether individuals would support or oppose affirmative action as a policy. Perceived fairness, in turn, is influenced by evaluation on the basis of a “fairness heuristic,” a general subjective evaluation criterion used by the individual to make evaluative judgments (Lind, 1992). This heuristic may come from many sources; one of them is the subjective value systems of the individual. The subjective values of the individual are organized in a hierarchy of value preferences (Rokeach, 1973). Meritocracy and equality for all are two values of the Americans but, at different times in history and for different individuals, these two values are not necessarily of equal preference (Rokeach, 1973; Rokeach & Ball-Rokeach, 1988). Peterson’s work, using paired comparison of different values, found that these values are somewhat negatively correlated—that is, for many Americans, equality and meritocracy are not seen as compatible to each other. Using affirmative action as a procedure would imply the redistribution of resources according to group or categorical identity. If resources are perceived to be scarce and limited, this subjective value systems of the individual will correspondingly decrease.

Perceived Scarcity of Resources

Resentment on the part of other candidates is particularly intense when opportunities are scarce and the gain of the affirmative action appointee is seen as at the expense of other more competent candidates. In other words, the perceived resources and the perception of resources as a “zero-sum game” or as an “expanding pie” is of critical relevance here. Affirmative action is often seen not as a means to help expand the pie, but as a redistribution of existing—and in economically hard times—limited resources. The appointee is often seen as a recipient of some kind of charity rather than deserving an opportunity to serve as a viable, contributing member to the economy. In other words, diversity of the work force is not seen as a means of economic expansion but as a social charity—that is, an equal opportunity, inadvertently call attention to ethnic categorization and differences.

Social psychological literature abounds with evidence suggesting that salience of group identity facilitates stereotyping and differential treatment (see, for instance, Tajfel, 1982). As Allport and current-day cognitive psychologists have observed, the human mind thinks in categories, and once formed, categories are the basis of normal judgment (Allport, 1954, p. 20). The weight of evidence seems to suggest that the most effective means of reducing prejudice is to erode group boundaries or at least reduce the salience of categories (Devine, 1995). Methods suggested include creating functional groups composed of members from previously different groups (see, for instance, Brewer, Ho, Lee, & Miller, 1987). When members of different groups are able to forge a superordinate group identity, the “them-ness” (outgroup) and “we-ness” (ingroup) conceptualization will be reduced; it follows that intergroup discrimination and conflicts will correspondingly decrease.

In reality, however, an affirmative action appointee is labeled as a “special” employee and treated differently, either positively or negatively. This “otherness” perception will not be eradicated. Labeling the candidate will bring heightened salience of group identity to the candidate. This salience often interferes with processing of information of the individual by bringing forth the “illusory correlation” (Hamilton & Rose, 1980) which is found to be a favored principle in distributing of wealth and resources in the United States. At the heart of the matter seems to be a value conflict between equality and equity and the resulting sense of “fairness.”

Heightened Salience of Group Differences

Affirmative action, as a general policy, often involves a set of policies that share a common concern: the inclusion of categorical membership such as race and gender. Under this general policy, a diversity of action procedures have been designed and implemented by various educational and employment agencies (Nacostce, 1990). These affirmative action plans, though intending to provide...
expendable luxury. If it has to come at the expense of others’ opportunities, then it is doubly unfair.

Affirmative action programs in the U.S., from this author’s point of view, can only serve as temporary measures to address past inequity. Our immediate attention in the U.S., then, should be focused on a fair and more acceptable practice of affirmative action.

Based on the prevailing values of the Americans, democracy and meritocracy, equity and equality, one can surmise that “fairness” means an equal opportunity to compete, an equal opportunity where individuals can exercise their efforts in realizing their potential and contribute to the community. Affirmative action programs, then, should be designed to provide equal opportunities to learn, work, and contribute.

The following recommendations may be helpful to ease the sense of “unfairness” in affirmative action programs: (1) Open and merit-based selection on affirmative action appointment. Affirmative action programs are designed to address past inequities; they are attempts to balance the ethnic proportions in the workforce. As such, affirmative action programs should, at least in the short run, be focused on filling positions with qualified members of underrepresented populations. To avoid criticism of filling positions with inferior, and therefore “unde­ served” personnel, selection should be open and merit based. Here the emphasis is on the openness or the public and objective nature of the selection procedure. (2) Equity in evaluation: Once appointed, the organization should make sure the appointee is given the same challenges and evaluation as any other appointee. (3) Functional integration: More importantly, a mechanism for integrated socialization should be provided so that the appointee is working alongside the others and suffers or enjoys “the same fate” (Triandis, 1989) as the others in order to be incorporated into the ingroup rather than remaining as an outsider. In other words, making the workforce diverse in its ethnic makeup. By making all able-bodied citizens contributing members is a viable and perhaps vital means to economic expansion whereby more opportunities will be created for the entire population.

References


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