Article

The colour of success: a qualitative study of affirmative action attitudes of black academics in South Africa

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Abstract

A number of studies have shown that white people's attitudes towards affirmative action are largely negative and ambivalent. This ambivalent opposition to affirmative action has been explained in terms of a commitment to equality and sympathy for the plight of many poor black people, on the one hand, but lingering racial prejudice, intergroup competition and ideological conservatism on the other hand. This study sought to address the paucity of research on black attitudes to affirmative action to determine the nature and range of black attitudes. Since the main explanations of white opposition to affirmative action (anti-black prejudice and intergroup competition) do not apply in the case of blacks, a second aim of this study was to identify factors that could account for opposition to affirmative action among black people. Eight open-ended interviews were conducted with black academics employed at a historically white university in South Africa. Interviewees spoke about affirmative action in general as well as the role that it had played in their own careers. The results revealed high levels of tension and conflict in the talk about affirmative action, which we characterise as ambivalent support. The prime reason for opposition to affirmative action was the stigma associated with being a (potential) beneficiary of the policy.

Introduction

Affirmative action has been defined (Swain 1996:1) as a 'range of governmental and private initiatives that offer preferential treatment to members of designated racial or ethnic … groups (or to groups thought to be disadvantaged), usually as a means of compensating them for the effects of past and present discrimination'. In practice, this compensation involves providing preferential opportunities to members of previously disadvantaged groups in areas such as hiring, promotions, government contracting, access to housing, and inclusion in sports teams. Given that affirmative action advantages one group at the expense of another, often on racial grounds, it is not surprising that the policy has provoked controversy. Not only does it raise debates about the official use of racial categorisation, but it also raises issues of procedural and distributive justice.

A fair body of literature has examined responses of whites to affirmative action. Historical trends in the United States have shown that in comparison with increasing levels of support for other race-targeted policies (eg, desegregation of schools and neighbourhoods), there is consistent widespread opposition to affirmative action among whites (Schuman et al 1997, Krysan 1998). In addition, evidence suggests that attitudes towards affirmative action are characterised by ambivalence and duality. Most Americans view race as a 'categorical disability deserving of special aid' (Katz et al 1986:41), but they also blame blacks for their plight, attributing this to laziness or lack of ambition. Thus, while many support some form of compensatory programme to help blacks they are opposed to preferential treatment programmes such as affirmative action (Tuch and Hughes 1996). This duality of attitudes is expressed in terms of the 'principle-implementation gap' (Durrheim and Dixon 2004). On the one hand, whites endorse the general principle of integration and racial equality, but on the other hand, they are opposed to policies such as affirmative action which are designed to bring about such integration and equality in practice (Schuman et al 1997, Kim 2000).

A number of different explanations have been offered for this ambivalent opposition to affirmative action among whites. Building on Blumer's group position theory, Bobo (1988, Bobo et al 1997) attributes white opposition to intergroup competition and conflict. Although whites are aware of and sympathetic to black disadvantage, as members of a dominant group, they 'will tend to develop and adopt attitudes and beliefs that defend their privileged, hegemonic social position' (Bobo 1988:95). A second explanation accounts for this opposition in terms of ideological conservatism (Sniderman and Tetlock 1986). Conservatives subscribe to a free market economy and thus oppose affirmative action because it involves government intervention. A third set of authors attribute the opposition to racial prejudice. There are two different versions of the prejudice hypothesis. Symbolic racism theorists argue that in order to present themselves as tolerant and egalitarian, whites no longer express crude beliefs that characterised old-fashioned racism (Kinder and Saunders 1996). Nonetheless, vestiges of racial hatred remain and are expressed in socially-acceptable ways including opposition to the 'unfair' advantages of affirmative action (Sears 1988, Sears et al 1997). Aversive racism theorists argue that liberals believe themselves to be non-prejudiced but harbour unconscious negative feelings about blacks that are expressed in subtle, indirect and rationalisable ways, including opposition to affirmative action (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986, Dovidio and Gaertner 2004).

Many of the themes of the quantitative literature are replicated in the qualitative studies on affirmative action: it is predominantly whites who have been interviewed; and they have drawn a distinction between affirmative action in principle and in practice. The qualitative literature provides an insight into the content of the ambivalence that characterise whites' attitudes and beliefs. For example, Kravitz and Van Epps (1995) found that their interviewees thought that affirmative action would help black people achieve equal opportunities, but they complained that the programmes were unfair and discriminated against whites (cf Kravitz et al 1997).

This ambivalent discourse has a defensive quality as whites attempt to bolster their self-presentation as tolerant non-racist people while at the same time opposing programmes that are designed to help blacks. They articulate support for change whilst concurrently struggling against it. Rhetorically, this is achieved in two related ways. First, arguments against affirmative action are defended in terms of the principles of justice, equality and fairness, while affirmative action is portrayed as 'reverse discrimination' (Pincus 2001) or 'reverse apartheid' (Wambugu 2005). Second, whites portray themselves as victims of this new reverse discrimination as they complain about being 'pushed away', and denied opportunities they deserve.

In line with the arguments of Sniderman and Tetlock (1986), these opinions about affirmative action are defended in the terms of conservative political and economic ideology. The problem is government intervention, whereas it should be a free-market process, informed by standards of merit, that dictates the opportunities that individuals either do or do not have. Merit is viewed as an objective phenomenon (Pincus 2001), and selection decisions need to be made in a 'colour-blind' manner.

In addition to articulating conservatism, the arguments against affirmative action also betray vestiges of racial prejudice. In portraying blacks as not deserving or in lacking merit, speakers often unintentionally express negative stereotypes about blacks. Both Franchi (2003) and Wambugu (2005) identify a strategy of 'othering' in arguments against affirmative action. Speakers portray blacks as dissimilar or opposite to whites, and they stereotypically construct blacks as being unskilled, inexperienced or incompetent, in comparison with whites who are being discriminated against by affirmative action policies.

Finally, as anticipated by Bobo's (1988) group position theory, the ambivalent rhetoric with which whites express their opinions about affirmative action betrays defensiveness about group position. Arguments about the unfairness of affirmative action in overlooking the merit of whites not only imply negative stereotypes about blacks, but they also express a set of expectations about what whites rightly deserve. On the basis of her interviews about political transformation with white South Africans, Steyn (2001a, 2001b) argued that their views of just deserts, which were developed in apartheid, now underpin opposition to policies such as affirmative action, which are viewed as 'the confiscation of entitlement rather than equalization' (2001b:89).

In sum, the qualitative literature shows how whites rationalise opposition to affirmative action while at the same time denying that they are prejudiced or racist. Their evaluations of affirmative action have a defensive tone, informed by a conservative ideology, but articulating implicit racial prejudice and a sense of group entitlement.

In contrast to the literature on white attitudes to affirmative action, there is a relative paucity of research on black attitudes. In part, this may be due to the ideological bias in the social sciences, which has portrayed whites as active perceivers but blacks as passive targets (Shelton 2000). On the other hand, this skewed research focus may simply be due to the fact that research has mostly been concerned to explain opposition to affirmative action, and it was simply assumed that blacks would generally support the policy.[1]

There is evidence to suggest that black people, and other beneficiaries of affirmative action, are generally in favour of the policy. On the basis of their overview of survey data in the USA, Schuman et al (1997:257) conclude that there are 'large racial differences' and 'a gulf in attitudes' with regard to 'support for both government expenditures to help blacks and preferential treatment in favour of blacks'. A poll conducted by *CBS News/New York Times* in 1997 indicated that 77 per cent of black Americans, compared to 32 per cent of whites, felt that it is crucial for the workforce in an organisation to be racially diverse, and more than two-thirds of blacks indicated that affirmative action played an important role in their educational or employment experience (Paul 2003).

Although there is widespread support of affirmative action in the black community, it is by no means unanimous or unqualified. The historical review of Schuman et al (1997) indicates that at least 20 per cent of blacks are opposed to affirmative action, and that this proportion has been slowly increasing over time. Ayers investigated the perceptions of affirmative action held by women of colour. The results indicated qualified support: affirmative action was viewed to be fair, '*although* fairer in principle than in practice' (1992:223, emphasis added). Boikhutso's (2004) study of perceptions of affirmative action beneficiaries in South African parastatals showed similar results. There was widespread support for affirmative action, which was seen as beneficial for the organisation and the economy, as well as necessary for eradicating discrimination in employment practices in South Africa. However, the respondents qualified their support, arguing that the policy would achieve its aims '*only if* it was implemented correctly and if the necessary support and training is provided to them to help them meet and exceed their employers' expectations' (Boikhutso 2004:v, emphasis added).

The present study investigated the perceptions of affirmative action among black people. This focus was chosen not only to address the paucity of research on black attitudes, but also to investigate some theoretical questions about the underlying causes of opposition to affirmative action. As argued above, the explanations of white opposition to affirmative action have focused on ideological conservatism, anti-black prejudice (symbolic and aversive racism) and intergroup competition and conflict. It is significant that these later two explanations do not apply in the case of blacks, who are less likely to be harbouring prejudice towards themselves (but see Jost et al 2004); and, in terms of intergroup competition, should support the policy which gives them a competitive advantage over whites. The possibility that these two explanations do not apply could certainly be a factor in explaining widespread support for affirmative action among blacks.

In addition to policy

prejudice and intergroup conflict hypotheses? These questions were explored by means of a qualitative study of affirmative action attitudes among black members of staff at a historically white university in South Africa.

South African case study

South Africa is characterised by striking social inequality with unemployment and social ills alarmingly higher for blacks and women (The Presidency 2004); and is ranked 5 out of 112 countries by the 2005 CIA Factbook in terms of the GINI index of inequality (cf Morse 2004). In 1996 the poorest 20 per cent of income earners received only 1.5 per cent of the national income while the wealthiest 10 per cent received 50 per cent of national income (Mboweni 1997). This skewed income distribution favours whites to the detriment of blacks among whom 65 per cent of Africans, 33 per cent of Coloureds and 2.5 per cent of Indians live in poverty – compared with 1 per cent of whites.

This pattern in inequality is the product of hundreds of years of colonialism, culminating in apartheid. Since 1948, the National Party government adopted laws that were specifically designed to marginalise blacks as second class citizens (see Ashforth 1990). These included the provision of substandard 'Bantu' education (Education White Paper 3 1997), as well as the Industrial Conciliation Act (No. 28) of 1956, which enabled the minister of labour to reserve categories of skilled and managerial employment for whites (see Crankshaw 1997).

This legacy of racial inequality continues to be felt today, where white males continue to dominate management positions, whereas lower-paid and lower-skilled employment is almost entirely the domain of black people. Affirmative action in South Africa needs to be appreciated against this backdrop of state orchestrated inequality. In addition to scrapping apartheid legislation, the post-apartheid government has instituted a wide range of affirmative action policies to try to redress past racial and political discrimination. The new government sought not only to eradicate inequality by eliminating discrimination, but also by supporting the efforts of blacks to compete more fairly with historically privileged whites (Mboweni 1997).

Affirmative action in South Africa is supported by the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (4 of 2000), and the Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998). These Acts sought to achieve both demographic transformation and equal opportunity in employment by (a) eliminating unfair discrimination, (b) implementing affirmative action, and (c) policing these labour practices in newly established 'Equality Courts' (cf Msimang 2001).

Since their inception, these policies have been marred by much controversy and have been the subject of increasing debate and tension. The *Towards a Ten Year Review* (The Presidency 2004:41), commissioned by the government to take stock of transformation in South Africa, notes that 'empowerment in the workplace is continuing, but very slowly'. This report highlights that the proportion of black people who are managers, senior officials and legislators increased from 43 per cent in 1996 to 44.3 per cent in 2001; and the percentage of professionals, associate professionals and technicians increased from 58 per cent to 61.4 per cent between 1996 and 2001 (The Presidency 2004). Thus while the legislation has been effective, the pace of change has been slow. This is also the case at the university under study, where in 2005 African academic staff made up 17 percent of the staff profile and Coloureds 2 per cent – compared to Indians who constitute 27 per cent and Whites who constitute 54 per cent of the staff profile (data from University Equity Office). This is certainly true of the situation in higher education, where historically white universities now have diverse and representative student bodies. However, informal segregation remains apparent among the students body (see Schrieff et al 2005), and the change in the staff profile continues to lag substantially behind that of student demographics (Durrheim et al 2004).[2] In addition, recurrent press reports of accusations of racism levelled against university staff and management suggest that the university culture in these institutions continues to be unaccommodating to black staff and students.

While change may be slow, the debates around affirmative action are fierce. Supporters argue that the policies are necessary to 'normalise' South African society, but opponents reject the policy as ineffective and discriminatory. As discussed above, most of the research has focussed on opposition to affirmative action by white people, who reject the policy on ethical and practical grounds, and articulate a sense of exclusion and discrimination. In the discussion below, we focus on the opinions of a small sample of black academic staff from one of these transformed, historically white universities, at which black staff remain a distinct minority.

Methodology

One-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with black staff members at a single South African higher education institution. The aim of the interviews was to explore the participants' opinions about affirmative action and to investigate some theoretical questions about the underlying causes of opposition to affirmative action. Discourse analytic theory, methods and techniques were used to guide the design of the interviews and the analysis of the conversations (see Potter and Wetherell 1987, 1994; Potter 1998). These provide useful tools for investigating the active construction of affirmative action, focusing on the variability and heterogeneity in accounts.

Sample

The sample was comprised of eight black academics, five males and three females. The sample was purposively selected. An attempt was made to select a diverse sample of black (African) academics; and thus we selected opinions (Billig 1996). Practically, such analysis entailed a detailed reading of the transcripts, noting the different ways in which the interviewees constructed affirmative action, giving it a positive or negative gloss. This method of analysis was ideal for achieving our research purposes. First, we sought to describe the content and form of opinions, detailing reasons for support and opposition, and identifying ambivalence and tension between support and opposition. Second, we sought to study this complex of reasons, constructions and tensions, (a) to understand the sources of black opposition and support for affirmative action, thus allowing us to (b) compare black with white opinion.

Racial redress: source of support for affirmative action

All interviewees expressed strong support for affirmative action, arguing that it was necessary to redress the racial inequities produced by apartheid. Affirmative action was seen as a means to eradicate the legacy of racism in South Africa, and to provide employment opportunities for the majority who had been previously disadvantaged.

Extract 1: Interviewee 3 *(see Appendix for guide to interview layout and symbols)*

R: And the first question I'd like to ask is what is do you understand by the term 'affirmative action'?

I3: mmm. It sounds like an assignment. Like a question for the test ((laughter)). Well affirmative action is urm (.4) I'd say, a (.8) a way of trying to redress the, the imbalances of the apartheid system – the way I understand, in the context of South [Africa

R: [Africa. Yes.

I3: Ja in the South African context. Trying to, to, to, to, to, to redress the ineq the inequities and inequalities of you know (.) the apartheid system where white people were privileged, err, they were put in positions and their positions were protected and black people were discriminated – non-white people generally, were discriminated against because of who they were, in the hierarchy of who was important in South Africa.

Extract 2: Interviewee 4

R: Yes. So what do you understand by the term affirmative action?

I4.: (.2) This term (.) my understanding of this term is that (.) it's (.) it refers to those people who were disadvantaged during the era of the apartheid government, those being black people or the people who did not enjoy all the benefits of the government of that day. Now this term is saying (.) let us try, try and re, redress the imbalances in terms of empowerment and (.) empowerment in, in urm all its spheres. It says let us try and correct the imbalances, in other words (.), you will be an affirmative, an affirmation person if you were disadvantaged during the previous era.

Extract 3: Interviewee 7

R: …So could you tell me what do you understand by the term affirmative action?

I7: …my understanding of affirmative action is (.) where you are trying to:: correct an imbalance ah:: (R: yes) in an employment situation.

Extract 4: Interviewee 5

R: What do you understand by the term affirmative action?

I5: (.2) Um (.1) I understand it to mean (.3) uh (.7) an employment (.1) policy (.1) where (.3) where people who where previously disadvantaged (.3) are encouraged to be (.1) employed (.2) and (.2) unlike in the past.

R: So kind of getting, getting previously disadvantaged people (.) back into the
(.1) work place?

I5: Yes, yes, it is a [principle

R: [Ja

I5: Its hanging on the principle to give everybody a chance.

Extract 5: Interviewee 1

R: First I’d like to just start off by asking what do you understand by the term affirmative action?

I1: (.3) Um, I think for me (.2) affirmative action is, is, is basically about understanding the (.4) our, our, our, our context, our current South African context but also the past (.) um and then understanding the fact that there were (.1) I think the past then informs the, the current situation (R: yes) in the sense that you got to know in the past people were consciously um not allowed or (.3) um indirectly not encouraged to, to do or be able to, to achieve or take certain positions in life. And, and, and my understanding of affirmative action is that it creates a (.1) like (.1) what do you call it in sports um (.3) um, um (.4) (R: um equal opportunity) it’s more about uuh like restructuring it’s like what do they call it? I can’t remember it’s (.1) (R: Development?) Not necessarily, it’s basically actually saying that um as long (.1) the current situation cannot actually be allowed to continue because it’s not truly representative of our of our (.2) South African society and therefore goes against everything else that we value (.1) our constitution, bill of rights (.1) the struggle that people fought and died for you know.

The extracts above all come from the start of the interviews, where participants were asked to communicate their understandings of affirmative action, which they all did in very similar ways. Affirmative action was defined as a process of achieving collective redress, targeting groups variously constructed as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘black’ or ‘non-white’. Respondents maintained that redress is an important corrective action taken to remedy past systemic imbalance and the inequalities experienced by the majority of black South Africans. Racial redress is generally perceived as positive as it will inevitably lead to the ‘empowerment’ of the previously disadvantaged. In this way affirmative action is seen as a means of reparation.

The accounts of affirmative action supplied above are general textbook-like definitions. This is apparent in Extract 1, where I3 likens the task of providing her ‘understandings’ with a university test or assignment. The required response is a ‘correct’ answer. There is convergence in these ‘correct’ answers across interviewees. The need for affirmative action is understood in historical context with references made to apartheid, past imbalances and inequalities. The definitional response rests on a distinction between previously advantaged and disadvantaged racial groups and is interlaced with current political terminology. Redress is perceived as a means to bring this previously unbalanced system back to normality (Extract 2).

These definitions of affirmative action refer to the effects of apartheid and the need for redress for people generally, and not specific individuals, including themselves. Nonetheless, this talk about history, race and disadvantage sets terms of reference which clearly separate black from white opinion. As beneficiaries of affirmative action – both in terms of present opportunities and the eradication of racism – blacks support affirmative action as redress in a way that whites could not. However, much like the white opinion reviewed earlier, despite this positive view of affirmative action as redress, interviewees identified practical limitations of the policy. No sooner had they endorsed affirmative action, than they qualified their responses by identifying interrelated problems with affirmative action.

Sources of opposition to affirmative action

While good in theory or as a matter of principle, the participants expressed a number of reservations about the potential for affirmative action to bring about redress in practice. The first problem is that the masses are ill-equipped to satisfy the basic requirements and expectations in the labour market and thus cannot benefit. In the end, then, a small class of privileged black people benefit from affirmative action. The second problem is that white business owners strategically appoint black staff as 'tokens' to positions they are ill-equipped for, thus retaining power in the economy.

Extract 6: Interviewee 1

R: So in your view do you think affirmative action is still needed today?

I1: Oh ja, I think, I think we definitely (.), we definitely need it (.3). *But* when we think of affirmative action I mean what really, what honestly comes to mind (.) to me (.) and that, all the assumptions that are not based on that poor (.1) uneducated group (.2) That for me is the issue (.1) So it's useful and it's important (.1) but I'm not sure how it impacts (.1) on that and because I'm not sure (.) how that actually happens all that I can see I that its setting people up against each other (.2) in the long run (.2) um.

R: You mean black people?

I1: Ja, I'm meaning black African people (R: ok) ja 'cause I mean there are some people who are doing so well and some who are not doing well (.1) who will never do well (.1) because they have never received education (.) and then people will then say you know (.) now you can get educated (.2) (R: yes) just because I am educated (.) than the child of a person who was never educated. So (.1) you see this thing carries over right through persons, cultures, everything that is in calculated within family. And my view (.) is that somehow for me affirmative action touches a certain group (.1) which is important (.1) important, very important but the majority (.2) of South Africans are not being touched by it (.2)

Extract 7: Interviewee 3

R: Do you think there are any negatives of affirmative action?

I3: Ja, I think there are, there are negatives of affirmative action because well, I'm not sure if they are negatives but the perception, even amongst black people that only a few, you know this BEE ((ie, Black Economic Empowerment)) thing (R: yes, yes) that only a few are benefiting (.1) the very same people are benefiting from affirmative action policies because you get the same person moving from this job to that job to that job you know, and then you ask yourself what happens to the [rest

R: [rest

I3.: So (.) I think the gap is widening even amongst the black people=

R: = Community, ja

I3: There's now, there's now. Previously there was the race thing, now it's the class thing. Because you've got black people who've really succeeded because of policies of affirmative action but then there's a gap between the successful black person and the unsuccessful black or the poor is widening (R: yes, yes). So, in a sense I think that that's a negative of, of affirmative action.

Extract 8: Interviewee 4

R: Some people may say (.) that affirmative action has just helped the <u>haves</u> of the black community get better jobs and move up (.) the corporate ladder while the people who don't have after 10 years of affirmative action. What's your view on this?

I4: It's true (1) that it works like that. But we need to think beyond that (R: mmmmm). You cannot say, you cannot go to a, a, a goat herder and say 'I am now going to give you the opportunity to drive an aeroplane' (R: yes). A goat herder who'll say '<u>are you (.), are you serious about this</u>' he will say 'yes' but you are running a risk because a goat herder has not had an opportunity, maybe he doesn't even have a matric (R: yes), let alone mathematics. But now you want to go to the person who will understand mathematics for this particular person to be a pilot (R: mmhmm) and that is going to be a person who at least haves something by then. You are saying to this particular person, let's start from where you are and upwards. And there's nothing wro::ng with that (R: y:es) because you want this thing to work

Extract 9: Interviewee 2

R: What do you think some of the negatives are (.) of affirmative action?

I2: Ok, in the minds (.) ((Laughter)) of (.2) some black people (R: Yes) they immediately limited using the now-familiar ‘yes but, …’ formulation of the disclaimer (see Billig 1988).

Despite the fact that black attitudes toward affirmative action reveal a similar ‘principle-implementation gap’ that characterises white attitudes, the sources of opposition to affirmative action are fundamentally different in the case of these black interviewees. White opposition is grounded in an interrelated set of concerns about individual merit, institutional standards, and the fairness of selection decisions which exclude whites. In contrast, the sources of black opposition to affirmative action revolve around the inability of the policy to achieve racial redress in practice.

The interviewees reported a number of different but interrelated problems with the way in which the affirmative action policies were being implemented. A fundamental problem was that rather than reducing inequalities in society as intended, affirmative action was seen to be simply changing the demographic profile of privilege. The fault lines of inequality were shifting from race to class: ‘previously there was the race thing, now it’s the class thing’ (extract 7), while the ‘poor uneducated group’, ‘the majority of South Africans’ and ‘the poor’ continue to be denied opportunities and are marginalised. Moreover, echoing official statistics, a number of interviewees observed that the gap between the ‘haves and have-nots’ in society had actually even widened. The concern, therefore, was that affirmative action, rather than effecting redress, might be exacerbating the problem of inequality. The practice of affirmative action was failing against its own criteria.

The failure of affirmative action to achieve redress in practice is attributed to constraints in institutional and social reality, the demands of the job market, which limit what is possible. Theoretically, to achieve equality, redress implies taking the most disadvantaged people, providing them with a quality education and the necessary support, thus equipping them for the world of work. However, in practice, the affirmed must possess the qualifications and skills to satisfy employment criteria. As I4 argued, you cannot simply take a goat herder and say ‘I’m going to give you the opportunity to drive an aeroplane’ (Extract 8). The principle of affirmative action bumps up against reality and must defer to the demands of merit, standards, qualifications and experience. These are the same demands that whites base their opposition of affirmative action on.

A consequence of these constraints is that it is only middle-class black people, who have been able to afford a good education, who are the true beneficiaries of affirmative action. A select group of individuals from the black community can ‘get better jobs and move up the corporate ladder’ (Extract 8). This then opens the door to another set of problems with affirmative action: it encourages and rewards self-serving individuals who believe that ‘being black is a password’ for getting jobs (Extract 9). White business then exploits this, making token appointments who end up reaffirming the racial stereotypes and entrenching the marginalisation of blacks in institutional life.

Extract 10: Interviewee 8

R: Okay um:: what has been the impact of affirmative action on society?

I8: You mean beginning when (.1) beginning in 1652?

R: No now today today’s society

I8: Affirmative action has never really been meaningfully implemented even in those cases where they identify um so called um: affirmative action candidates (R: yes) those people are used for window dressing um:: they maybe called when there’s (.1) important meetings so as to show the world what we have got so for me.

Extract 11: Interviewee 1

R: Ok, um in what ways can affirmative action be made to be more effective?

I1: (.1) Eh that’s a difficult one ((laughter)), that’s a difficult one (.2). Um (.6) you see (.3) I don’t know if it can be made to be more effective because I mean the the the other reality is (.1) that affirmative action is being use (.2) can be used (.2) manipulated for (.) for example in terms of fronting (.2). Um (.2), um where you just put black faces (.1). Because when you’re in board meetings they just say yes (.2) and they’re pathetically forever grateful for putting them in those positions (.1) and therefore they don’t belong or change the system (.1).

In Extract 10, I8 traces the origin of affirmative action back to 1652, the year (when van Riebeek landed) often associated with the start of colonialism in South Africa. Implicitly, then, affirmative action is viewed as a mechanism of the production of inequality. As it is applied today, it takes the form of window dressing, showcasing ‘so-called affirmative action candidates’, but not effecting meaningful change. Criticism is levelled against the institutions manipulating affirmative action to their own ends, employing black people as fronts to satisfy racial quotas and to provide a good impression of inclusion. Criticism is also levelled against individual beneficiaries of affirmative action. Together the instrumental institutions and the obsequious yes-sayers ensure that meaningful change in power relations and levels of black inclusion and participation are not achieved.

In sum, the black participants in this study expressed what we can term qualified support for affirmative action. Their support for the principle of affirmative action was moderated by practical concerns grounded in a view of the constraints of social and institutional reality, dictated by standards and merit; and in stereotypes of black individuals using affirmative action to service their own self-interest. In all these ways black attitudes were remarkably similar to the white attitudes discussed in the introduction of this article. On the other hand, both the sources of support and opposition to affirmative action articulated by our participants differed fundamentally from the attitudes of whites reviewed earlier. Our interviewees supported affirmative action as a mechanism to achieve racial redress, to remove inequality in practice. In contrast with whites' prime concern with procedural fairness, our black participants were primarily interested in ends, and criticised the policy for failing to eradicate the inequalities of apartheid in practice.

Personal narratives: being a subject of affirmative action

After the interviewees provided a general understanding of affirmative action and identified the problems associated with this policy, they faced the question of its impact on their own careers. Responses were noticeably different from the talk around the collective nature of affirmative action, which had been communicated with relative ease.

Extract 12: Interviewee 7

R: Okay what effect has affirmative action had on your career?

I7: (.1) None I've never had ah: I've never been (.3) promoted or:: for well in terms of affirmative action or had anything

R: So it hasn't had any effect on your career or you as a black lecturer in South Africa? I7: No I don't think so (.1) as far as I'm concerned I was employed on merit and promoted on merit I'm still:: doing things on merit.

Extract 13: Interviewee 8

R: Okay um: what effect has affirmative action had on your career? I8: Me? R: Yes I8:

How is affirmative action as you understand it now had an impact on my career nothing (.2) I can tell you this is between you and me I graduated as a top honours student at University X on top of my class ((banging pen on desk)) (R: yes) I've been to overseas the universities (.) prestigious ones those are things I achieved on my <u>own</u>.

Extract 14: Interviewee 2

R: Ja, has it had on your career (.2), do you think?

I2: (.2) You know I don't particularly believe that (.2) ((Laughter)) the job I have (.2) I got it only because of affirmative action (.2). Whilst (.1) ok I, because I now know (.1) about that (.) uh Equity (1) Employment Act (.1) I now know that (.1) if I am, I'm black (.2) and I am appointed (.2), there's a white that is also appointed (.2) (R: Yes). The black person (.) has (.1), is the one that is offered the job (.), ok. So I think that (.1), I'm not sure (.), for example (.), if you're asking about my career? (R: Yes) So I don't know (.1) the other people that (.) I was (.) perhaps competing with, I really don't know (.2) (R: Yes). But I think (.) it must have had an effect (.2) <u>it must have</u>. (.2) I was a black woman (.1) uh finished a PhD (.1) so (.) and I think (.) using affirmative action and the Employment Equity Act then I think that gave me an advantage (R: Ok). Although (.) I don't know who my other (.) competitors were.

As a policy aimed at social redress, interviewees articulated their generally favourable attitudes to affirmative action with relative ease, indicating wide levels of support for the principle, but identifying problems with implementation. In contrast, as extracts 12 to 14 show, personal narratives of the role that affirmative action played in their careers were characterised by numerous pauses, hesitations, repairs, and laughter, which together suggest a lack of conversational ease. In extract 13, I8 appears to be surprised by the turn of conversation, first asking (in line 2) whether the question applies to his career, and then (in line 4) repeating the question before answering. Overall, there was a distinct sense that the interviewees either experienced trouble or were uncomfortable with talking about the possible impact that affirmative action had had on their own careers.

In some contrast to these displays of discomfort or dis-ease, their answers were unequivocal statements that affirmative action does not apply in their cases. This was achieved through a strategy we have termed defensive credentialing. Defensive credentialing refers to the interviewees' emphatic use of their credentials and qualifications to indicate that affirmative action does not apply in their case. In extract 12, I7 states categorically that affirmative action had ‘never’ played a role in his career, but that he had been employed and promoted purely on the grounds of merit. The speakers in extracts 13 and 14 adumbrate what accounts for merit in their instances. I8 graduated top of his honours class and had attended prestigious overseas universities – things he emphasises (banging on the desk) that he had achieved on his own. While I2 conceded that, being a black woman, affirmative action policies may have influenced her appointment, she was quick to point out that, having finished her PhD, she was suitably qualified for the position.

By means of this defensive credentialing, the interviewees distanced themselves from the collective (those in need of redress). Defensive credentialing entailed portraying oneself as an exception to the rule that black people are in need of preferential treatment. Affirmative action does not apply in their instances because they have achieved their current status on merit, having impeccable academic credentials. This way of talking stands in marked contrast to the qualified support the interviewees had given to affirmative action as a general policy. Whereas they had previously spoken with a sense of solidarity as black people, supporting affirmative action, now they portrayed themselves as exceptions, unlike other black people, and distancing themselves from affirmative action.

Together, the discomfort displayed in talk about affirmative action in their own careers and the credentialing strategy show that the interviewees were on the defensive as they spoke about the possibility that the opportunities they had enjoyed or their current positions were obtained because of affirmative action. We might ask why this defensiveness? Following Billig (1996), we can interrogate this from the perspective of the rhetoric of opinions, that every attitude in favour of a position is also an attitude against some counter position. What are the interviewees arguing against with their defensive credentialing? In the section below we suggest that they are arguing against the applicability to them of the stereotype that blacks are lacking in merit. They are reluctant to subscribe to the stigmatised category of affirmative action candidates or workers.

The stigma of affirmative action

Affirmative action stigma refers to negative beliefs and perceptions about those who are (or assumed to be) beneficiaries of affirmative action. To a large extent, the interviewees’ defensiveness about being beneficiaries of affirmative action can be seen as a way of deflecting stigma.

and how we can eradicate this and get this out into the open (.1)

I5: Yes.

R: Because it seems to be such a disabling thing to feel [that

I5: [I tell you its one of the worst things that can happen to you. As someone put it sometime back, its like (.6) its like ja, its like having to expla::::in all people all the time why you chose to marry the person you married. Rather than enjoy the uh uh the marriage, you are working hard to to explain, no no I truly love her, even though she had money, even though she was from a big family, the only thing that attracted me to her was uh the true love. But people don't look at that. They look at, (.) they look at, ahh look at this man and the lady with the money.

R: Yes

I5: Ja, so explaining yourself over and over, that's exactly what, how I think. Its an example of the same thing. Where you feel that you have got pressure.

R: Ja

I5: You have got pressure to prove that it wasn't for those reasons that you uh, were employed. Because it will only, that reason that you were employed.

Extract 19: Interviewee 1

R: So is it ((being an affirmative action appointee)) almost a threat to your identity?

I1: A threat to your, to your self esteem (.3) to your confidence um (.3).

Extract 20: Interviewee 8

R: Okay (.) um: what are some of the positives of affirmative action? Is there any positives in your view?

I8: (.3) Uh: I, I really don't know I can talk about the, the [negatives

R: [Negatives okay

I8: The main negative thing is every black person now gets ah branded an affirmative action candidate (R: yes) uh:: without really looking at the (.2) the achievements of those people and how they got to be where they are::

The question of whether affirmative action candidates are employed (1) because they qualify for the position because they are black or (2) because they qualify for the position *and* they are black is an area of contention across interviews. Interviewees pointed out that it is often assumed that black employees occupy positions simply because they are black. This implies not only that the success of black people is attributable to unfair advantages they get by virtue of their being black, but also that black people generally are lacking in merit. This stigma of affirmative action spreads to all black employees, who have to contend with the perception that 'she's an affirmative action appointee and therefore she doesn't have what it takes' (Extract 15). Affirmative action becomes a means of stereotyping black people as incompetent, as 'every black person now gets branded an affirmative action candidate' (Extract 20).

These stereotypes about incompetent affirmative action beneficiaries work hand in glove with older, cruder and now unutterable stereotypes about the laziness and intellectual inferiority of black people. First, the stereotypes about incompetent affirmative action beneficiaries do the same work of portraying blacks as unqualified for jobs that whites should do; and second the unuttered stereotypes about blacks intelligence and work ethic helps to bolster the notion that affirmative action appointments are made because of skin colour rather than merit.

The stigma of affirmative action is infectious and ambiguous. Simply being black means that you will feel stigmatised as an incompetent affirmative action employee (Extract 18). There will be a 'general feeling' that you don't deserve to have your job (Extract 15). Like all stereotypes, the idea that black employees are incompetent affirmative action beneficiaries is difficult to shrug. The stereotype is impossible to disprove. As I5 argues, a black person proving that they obtained their employment on merit is like trying to prove that you married a wealthy spouse out of love for her and not her money. It is impossible to remove the doubt from the minds of others, and so likewise questions about competence continue to hang over the heads of black employees.

In a manner similar to that described by stereotype threat theory (Steele 1997; Steel et al 2002), it appeared as though the mere presence of the activated stereotype had an adverse effect on the self concept and even the behaviour of black employees. As they feel that their colleagues 'look down upon them' they will experience threats to their self-confidence and self-esteem, and in a way that confirms the stereotype, they will eventually fail and leave the organisation (see Extract 16, 19). As a black employee, affirmative action stigma is 'disabling' (Extract 18) and 'plays in to (sic) your mind' as you have the impossible task of trying to 'prove to people' that you are qualified and competent (Extract 17).

In the light of these concerns about affirmative action stigma, we are in a better position to appreciate why these interviewees dis-identify with the affirmative action label despite their general support for affirmative action as a policy. They use defensive credentialing to portray themselves as exceptions to the rule of incompetence, while the rule continually comes back to haunt them. Being 'branded' an affirmative action appointment is stigmatising, or 'deeply discrediting' to use Goffman's (1963:13) formulation. Thus, while interviewees initially framed affirmative action as positive, necessary and empowering they were reluctant to be 'branded' as such.

Discussion

Previous research on affirmative action has focussed mainly on the attitudes of white people, which have been found to be ambivalent, but generally unfavourable. White respondents typically support the principle of helping disadvantaged black people, but oppose affirmative action on practical and ethical grounds as a form of reverse discrimination, leading to the reduction of standards. This exploratory study sought to investigate whether similar ambivalent attitudes would be prevalent in a small sample of black academic staff at a South African university.

The talk about affirmative action by the interviewees was equivocal and peppered with ambivalence. This was reflected in the tensions and conflicts evident throughout and across the interviews. The talk relating to affirmative action evidenced a duality between the principles and the actual implementation of affirmative action policies. Interviewees reported that principally, redress was one of the most important purposes of affirmative action. They confidently argued for the necessity of affirmative action as a means of levelling the playing field to create equal opportunities to previously disadvantaged groups and to eradicate racism. However, after their initial optimism, they identified interrelated practical problems with the implementation of these policies, which were argued to benefit those already advantaged, and was exploited by self-interested individual beneficiaries and companies who employed them as 'window dressing'.

This was the first source of opposition to affirmative action among this black sample: in practice, because of the requirements and standards of the job market, the policy of affirmative action could not achieve the aim of redress, but continued to re-produce the class-based but deeply racial inequalities of the past. The second source of opposition to affirmative action has roots in the stigma associated with being a (possible) beneficiary of the policy. The interviewees adopted a defensive stance when talking about the role that affirmative action had played in their own careers, being unwilling to see themselves as beneficiaries of the policy. The reason for this defensiveness was clear: being seen as an affirmative action appointee is stigmatising or deeply discrediting, being associated with the erstwhile racist stereotypes of incompetence and lack of qualification.

In sum, it was apparent that the overall structure and content of the attitudes of this black sample had remarkable similarities to the attitudes of the white samples reported in the literature. Structurally, the attitudes were characterised by duality, ambivalence and conflict, containing both themes of support for and opposition to affirmative action. The duality took the form of the principle-implementation gap as the interviewees supported the principle of affirmative action but opposed it in practice. In addition to this attitudinal structure, our black sample also opposed affirmative action on similar grounds to white samples. First, both sets of attitudes are informed by what we could term capitalist realism: affirmative action is unworkable because it contradicts the demands of the market, which has objective skill requirements. This view underpins whites' concerns about lowering standards, and our black interviewees' concerns that, in practice, affirmative action will continue to favour those individuals who had already been advantaged. Second, both sets of attitudes are informed by negative stereotypes about the competencies of affirmative action beneficiaries and, by association, black employees. Whites are concerned about the unfairness of employing less qualified and incompetent black people in place of (better qualified, more competent) whites; whereas our black interviewees were concerned about themselves being seen as less qualified and incompetent affirmative action appointments.

Despite these similarities, there were also fundamental differences between black participant's attitudes and white attitudes reported in the literature. Whereas whites oppose affirmative action because of what they perceive as unfair discrimination against them, our interviewees were primarily concerned with the inability of the policy to bring about redress in practice. They supported the policy as a means of eradicating the legacy of racism and opposed the policy to the extent that it could not achieve these aims in practice. While white opposition is grounded in an interrelated set of concerns about individual merit, institutional standards, and the fairness of selection decisions which exclude whites, the sources of black opposition to affirmative action revolve around the inability of the policy to achieve racial redress in practice. A second fundamental difference between white and black opinion concerns relates to anti-black stereotypes that underlies affirmative action stigma. Whereas whites articulate such stereotypes in arguing against what they perceive to be the unfairness of black appointments, our black interviewees articulated a concern with being seen, in terms of these stereotypes, as incompetent affirmative action appointees.

Although the data do not warrant definitive conclusions, we are now in a position to reflect on the underlying explanations of opposition to affirmative action. Recall that there were three explanations of whites' opposition to affirmative action: (1) group interest in maintaining privilege, (2) ideological conservatism opposing government intervention, and (3) anti-black prejudice. The results of this study suggest that group interest factors do also shape black attitudes. Our interviewees all articulated an unreserved support for affirmative action as a mechanism of redress, eradicating the legacy of racism and the disadvantages faced by blacks. Given the different positions as groups advantaged and disadvantaged by the policy, it is not surprising that group interest factors motivated support for affirmative action by blacks, but opposition by whites.

The results of this study also suggest that two sets of ideological factors may shape opposition to affirmative action. First, ideological conservatism does appear to play a role. Like white research participants, our interviewees' staff, whereas eight years later, in 2002, it had changed to 21 per cent black and 51 per cent white.

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Appendix: transcript conventions

[	Left brackets indicate the point at which a current speaker’s talk is overlapped by another’s talk.
=	Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicate no gap between the two lines.
(4)	Numbers in parenthesis indicate elapsed time in silence in seconds.
(.)	A dot in a parenthesis indicates a tiny gap, probably no more than one-tenth of a second.
___	Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch or amplitude.
::	Colons indicate the prolongation of a sound. The length of the row of colons indicates the length of the prolongation.
-	Refers to a break or change indirection within a sentence.
(word)	Parenthesised words have been used to indicate the point at which one speaker makes comments within the other’s speech eg (R: Ja).
(( ))	Double parentheses contain the author’s descriptions rather than transcriptions, eg ((laughter)).
( )	Empty parentheses indicate the transcriber’s inability to hear what was said.