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White Identity and Affirmative Action

"I'm in favor of affirmative action except when it comes to my jobs."

Because of the persistence of residential segregation and the school segregation that often accompanies it, the workplace is one of the few places that the lives of people of color and Whites regularly intersect. Those intersections can sometimes lead to close friendships and serve as a catalyst for Whites to begin to examine their own racial identities. But even when the workplace is only a site of superficial exchanges across color lines, the presence of an affirmative action policy can be enough to draw an individual's attention to his own Whiteness. What will affirmative action mean in my life? Will I get the job I want, or will it go to some "minority"? Will the opportunities I expected still be there for me, or will I be the victim of "reverse racism"?

Even those Whites who have not given much thought to their racial identity have thought about affirmative action. As sociologist Howard Winant writes, assaults on affirmative action policies are "currently at hysterical levels. . . . These attacks are clearly designed to effect ideological shifts, rather than to shift resources in any meaningful way. They represent whiteness as *disadvantage*, something which has few precedents in U.S. racial history." Though there is almost no empirical evidence for this "imaginary white disadvantage," the idea has achieved "widespread popular credence."¹

In my classes and workshops, the concern about White disadvantage takes the form of questions about affirmative action and "reverse discrimination." Inevitably someone has a story to tell about a friend or relative who was not admitted to the school of her choice, or a par-

ent who lost a coveted promotion because a "less-qualified" person of color took that spot. It is interesting to note that the "less-qualified" person in the story is always a person of color, usually Black, never a White woman.² (When these stories are told, I often wonder how the speaker knows so much about the person of color's résumé.)

Whenever possible, I defer the discussion of affirmative action, at least until a basic understanding of racism as a system of advantage has been established. I do this because it is very difficult to have a useful discussion about affirmative action with a person who does not understand the concept of White privilege. If someone uses the phrases "affirmative action" and "reverse racism" in the same sentence, it is usually a sign that a lesson on White privilege is needed. This is not to say that everyone who understands White privilege supports affirmative action policies, but at least that basic understanding assures that all parties in the conversation recognize that there are systematic social inequities operating in our society, and that the playing field is not level. We may have different opinions about how to fix those inequities, but an acknowledgment of the inequities is essential to a productive conversation.

After assigning several readings on the topic of affirmative action, I ask my students to write essays about whether they think it is a good idea and why. If they are opposed to affirmative action, I ask them to propose an alternative approach to dismantling the system of advantage in the arenas of educational and employment opportunity. Several years ago, one young White woman wrote the following sentence in her essay: "I am in favor of affirmative action except when it comes to my jobs." I wrote in response, "Which jobs have your name on them?"

The sense of entitlement conveyed in the statement was striking. Of course, she wanted to get the jobs she applied for, and did not want to lose out to anyone, especially on the basis of race, a factor over which she had no control. Yet she seemed to assume that because she wanted them, they belonged to her. She assumed that she would, of course, be qualified for the job, and would therefore be entitled to it.

What was she assuming about the candidates of color? She did not seem to take into account the possibility that one of them might be as qualified, or more qualified, than she was. The idea that she as a White woman might herself be the recipient of affirmative action was apparently not part of her thinking. While she expressed a desire for equity and justice, she also wanted to maintain her own advantage. She was still sifting through some confused thinking on this issue. She is not alone.

----- What Is Affirmative Action?

There has been much public debate about affirmative action since its inception, with little attempt to clarify concepts. Politicians' interchangeable use of the terms *affirmative action* and *quotas* have contributed to the confusion, perhaps intentionally. The term *quota* has a repugnant history of discrimination and exclusion. For example, earlier in the twentieth century, quotas were used to limit how many Jews would be admitted to prestigious institutions of higher learning.

But despite common public perceptions, most affirmative action programs do not involve quotas, though they may involve goals. The difference between a goal and a quota is an important one. Quotas, defined here as fixed numerical allocations, are illegal, unless court-ordered as a temporary remedy for a well-documented, proven pattern of racially-motivated discrimination. Unlike a quota, goals are voluntary, legal, and may even be exceeded. Goals are not a ceiling meant to limit (as quotas did in the past). Instead, goals provide a necessary target toward which to aim. As any long-range planner knows, goals are necessary in order to chart one's course of action, and to evaluate one's progress. Goals are an essential component of effective affirmative action programs.

The term *affirmative action* was introduced into our language and legal system by Executive Order 11246, signed by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. This order obligated federal contractors to "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that

employees are treated during employment without regard to their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." As set forth by this order, contractors were to commit themselves to "apply every good faith effort" to use procedures that would result in equal employment opportunity for historically disadvantaged groups. The groups targeted for this "affirmative action" were White women, and men and women of color (specifically defined by the federal government as American Indian/Alaska Natives, Asian or Pacific Islanders, Blacks, and Hispanics). In the 1970s, legislation broadened the protected groups to include persons with disabilities and Vietnam veterans. Though Executive Order 11246 required affirmative action, it did not specify exactly what affirmative action programs should look like.³

Given this lack of specificity, it is not surprising that there is great variety in the way affirmative action programs have been developed and implemented around the country.⁴ The executive order had as its goal equal employment opportunity. But in practice, because of continuing patterns of discrimination, that goal cannot be reached without positive steps—affirmative actions—to create that equality of opportunity. Consequently, affirmative action can be defined as attempts to make progress toward actual, rather than hypothetical, equality of opportunity for those groups which are currently under-represented in significant positions in society by explicitly taking into account the defining characteristics—sex or race, for example—that have been the basis for discrimination.⁵ These attempts can be categorized as either *process-oriented* or *goal-oriented*.

Process-oriented programs focus on creating a fair application process, assuming that a fair process will result in a fair outcome. If a job opening has been advertised widely, and anyone who is interested has a chance to apply, and all applicants receive similar treatment (i.e., standard interview questions, same evaluation criteria and procedures), the process is presumed to be fair. The search committee can freely choose the "best" candidate knowing that no discrimination has taken place. Under such circumstances, the "best" candidate will sometimes be a person of color, "too good to ignore."⁶ In theory, such

would seem to be the case, and because process-oriented programs seem consistent with the American ideal of the meritocracy, most people support this kind of affirmative action.⁷ At the very least, it is an improvement over the "old boy network" that filled positions before outsiders even had a chance to apply.

Goal-oriented affirmative action also provides an open process. However, when the qualified pool of applicants has been identified, those among the pool who move the organization closer to its diversity hiring goals are favored. If the finalist hired was qualified but not the "best" choice in the eyes of those who don't share the goal, the decision is often criticized as "reverse discrimination."

Though the process-oriented emphasis is more palatable to some than the goal-oriented emphasis, in practice the process-oriented approach is often quite ineffective. Despite the attempts to insure a fair process, search committee after search committee finds the "best" person is yet another member of the dominant group. What goes wrong? Some answers may be found in the research of social psychologist John Dovidio and his colleagues.

----- Aversive Racism and Affirmative Action

In "Resistance to Affirmative Action: The Implications of Aversive Racism," John Dovidio, Jeffrey Mann, and Samuel Gaertner argue that White opposition to affirmative action programs is largely rooted in a subtle but pervasive form of racism they call "aversive racism." Aversive racism is defined as "an attitudinal adaptation resulting from an assimilation of an egalitarian value system with prejudice and with racist beliefs." In other words, most Americans have internalized the espoused cultural values of fairness and justice for all at the same time that they have been breathing the "smog" of racial biases and stereotypes pervading the popular culture. "The existence, both of almost unavoidable racial biases and of the desire to be egalitarian and racially tolerant, forms the basis of the ambivalence that aversive racists experience."⁸

Pointing to the findings of several impressive research studies, these social psychologists argue that because aversive racists see themselves as nonprejudiced and racially tolerant, they generally do not behave in overtly racist ways. When the norms for appropriate, non-discriminatory behavior are clear and unambiguous, they "do the right thing," because to behave otherwise would threaten the non-prejudiced self-image they hold. However, Dovidio and his colleagues assert that in situations when it is not clear what the "right thing" is, or if an action can be justified on the basis of some factor other than race, negative feelings toward Blacks will surface. In these ambiguous situations, an aversive racist can discriminate against Blacks without threatening his racially tolerant self-image.

For example, in a study in which White college students were asked to evaluate Black and White people on a simple "good-bad" basis, where choosing *bad* rather than *good* to describe Blacks might clearly indicate bias, the students consistently rated both Blacks and Whites positively. However, when the task was changed slightly to rating Blacks and Whites on a more subtle continuum of goodness, Whites were consistently rated better than Blacks. For instance, when the rating choice was "ambitious-not lazy," Blacks were not rated as more lazy than Whites, but Whites were evaluated as more ambitious than Blacks. Repeated findings of this nature led these researchers to conclude that a subtle but important bias was operating. In the eyes of the aversive racists, Blacks are not worse, but Whites are better.

How might such a bias affect hiring decisions? Would this kind of bias affect how the competence of Black and White candidates might be evaluated? To explore this question, a study was conducted in which White college students were asked to rate college applicants who on the basis of transcript information were strongly qualified, moderately qualified, or weakly qualified. In some cases the applicant was identified as Black, in other cases as White. When the applicant was weakly qualified, there was no discrimination between Black and White applicants. Both were rejected. When the applicant had moderate qualifications, Whites were evaluated slightly better than Blacks,

but not significantly so. However, when the applicant had strong qualifications, there was a significant difference between how strong White candidates and strong Black candidates were rated. Though the information that had been provided about the candidates was identical, the Black applicants were evaluated significantly less positively than the White applicants. The subtle bias that Dovidio and his colleagues have identified does not occur at all levels, but it occurs when you might least expect it, when the Black candidate is highly qualified. In this and other similar studies, Blacks could be seen as good, but Whites with the same credentials were consistently rated as better.⁹

The bias was even more apparent when the Black person being rated was in a position superior to the White evaluator. While high-ability White supervisors were accepted by subordinate White raters as being somewhat more intelligent than themselves, White evaluators consistently described high-ability Black supervisors as significantly less intelligent than themselves. So even when the Black supervisor is more competent than the White subordinate, the White again sees the situation as though a Black person less qualified than themselves is being given preferential treatment. The researchers speculate that the bias is accentuated in this scenario because the possibility of being subordinated to a Black person threatens deeply held (though perhaps unconscious) notions of White superiority.¹⁰

Social psychologists Susan Clayton and Sandra Tangri also discuss the illusory nature of "objective" evaluation, and offer another reason that the pattern of underestimating the abilities of competent Black candidates is so widespread. They suggest that when an evaluator expects a weak performance and sees a strong one, the strong performance is attributed to unstable causes such as luck or effort. Unlike "innate" ability, luck or effort can change and are therefore unreliable. However, strong performances based on ability will probably be repeated. Strong performances attributed to ability (the explanation likely used for White male candidates) are viewed more positively and

more often rewarded than performances assumed to be based on luck or an unusual effort.¹¹

Dovidio and colleagues conclude:

The aversive racism framework has important and direct implication for the implementation of affirmative action-type policies. Affirmative action has often been interpreted as "when all things are equal, take the minority person." Our research suggests that even when things are equal, they may not be perceived as equal—particularly when the minority person is well-qualified and the situation has personal relevance to the non-minority person. Because Whites tend to misperceive the competence of Blacks relative to themselves, resistance to affirmative action may appear quite legitimate to the protesters. Insufficient competence, not race, becomes the rationale justifying resistance.¹²

The particular irony is that the more competent the Black person is, the more likely this bias is to occur.

The research that has been discussed here has been framed in terms of Black-White relationships.¹³ Of course, affirmative action programs may also involve other people of color as well as White women.¹⁴ Yet the Black-White emphasis in the aversive racism framework seems well placed when we consider that researchers have found that negative attitudes toward affirmative action are expressed most strongly when Blacks are identified as the target beneficiaries. As Audrey Murrell and her colleagues point out, "whereas giving preference based on nonmerit factors is perceived as unfair, giving such preference to Blacks is perceived as more unfair."¹⁵

Now we can see why affirmative action efforts focusing on the process rather than the outcome are likely to be ineffective. There are too many opportunities for evaluator bias to manifest itself—in the initial recruitment and screening of applicants, in the interview

process, and ultimately in the final selection. Competent candidates of color are likely to be weeded out all along the way. Those that make it to the final selection process may in fact be "too good to ignore," but as the research suggests and as I have seen in some of my own search committee experiences, for Black candidates "too good to ignore" can mean too good to hire.

----- **"Not a Prejudiced Bone in Their Bodies": A Case Example** -----

During the first nine years of my teaching career, I taught on two different campuses. In each case, I was the only Black female faculty member throughout my tenure. Though both institutions identified themselves as "equal employment opportunity/affirmative action employers," my experience on search committees in those settings taught me a lot about why there weren't more Black women or many Black men on campus. Black applicants "too good to be ignored" regularly were ignored, sometimes because they were too good. "Can't hire him, he's too good, he won't stay." "She's good, but not exactly what we had in mind." "He gave a brilliant talk, but there's just something about him, I can't quite put my finger on it."

In at least one instance, I thought I could put my finger on it, and did. When I raised questions about racial bias, I was told by the chair of the search committee, "I've known all of these [White] people for years. There's not a prejudiced bone in their bodies." If you've read chapter 1, you know how I feel about that comment. In this particular instance, I replied, "You know, I don't think anyone on the committee would intentionally discriminate, but I know that people feel most comfortable with people like themselves, with the kind of people they've grown up around, that they play golf with. When interacting with someone who doesn't fit that description, there may be a kind of uneasiness that is hard to articulate. So when I sit in a committee meeting, and White people all agree that a Black candidate is well qualified for the position, better than the competing White candidates in fact, but then they say things like, 'I'm not sure if he's the

right person for the job,' 'I'm not sure what kind of colleague he'd be, I just didn't feel comfortable with him,' I think we have a problem."

We did have a problem. In this case, rather than offer the Black candidate the position, it was declared a failed search and the position was advertised again the following year. I was not asked to serve on the next search committee, and perhaps not surprisingly, there were no Black candidates in the pool of finalists the second time around. Did the Black candidate recognize the discrimination that I believe occurred, or was it seen as just another rejected application? I don't know. But this case highlighted for me one of the reasons that affirmative action is still needed. As social psychologist Faye Crosby writes,

Affirmative action is needed to lessen bias in the paid labor force because affirmative action is the only legal remedy in the United States for discrimination that does not require the victims (or someone with a stake in their welfare) to notice their condition and come forward with a grievance on their own behalf. . . . In affirmative action, designated individuals monitor the operations of institutions and so can notice (and correct) injustices in the absence of any complaint. This monitoring role is crucial because an accumulation of studies have shown that it is very difficult to detect discrimination on a case-by-case basis, even when the case involves the self.¹⁶

When we examine the aggregate data, case after case, hiring decision after hiring decision, the idiosyncracies of particular cases recede and the discriminatory pattern can emerge. Then we can make a change.

----- **Keeping Our Eyes on the Prize: Goal-Oriented Affirmative Action** -----

Though the research on evaluator bias is dismaying, it also points us in the direction of an effective response. Remember that when

expectations for appropriate behavior are clearly defined and a biased response can be recognized, Whites are consistently as positive in their behavior toward Blacks as toward Whites. If administrators clearly articulate the organization's diversity goals and the reasons that such goals are in the organization's best interests, the appropriate behavior in the search process should be clear. If we keep our eyes on the prize, we can get past the bias.

Some might say, "Doesn't such an outcome-based focus lead to instances of 'reverse discrimination,' when well-qualified majority-group candidates are rejected in favor of a less qualified candidate from an underrepresented group simply because that candidate meets the diversity goal?" Certainly that could happen, but only in a poorly administered program. When affirmative action programs are functioning appropriately, no one is ever hired who is not qualified for the job. To do so undermines the program and is patently unfair to the newly hired person who has in effect been set up to fail.

In a well-conceived and implemented affirmative action program, the first thing that should be done is to establish clear and meaningful selection criteria. What skills does the person need to function effectively in this environment? How will we assess whether the candidates have these required skills? Will it be on the basis of demonstrated past performance, scores on an appropriate test,¹⁷ the completion of certain educational requirements? Once the criteria have been established, anyone who meets the criteria is considered qualified.

Now we can consider who among these qualified candidates will best help us achieve our organizational goals for diversifying our institution. If one candidate meets the criteria but also has some additional education or experience, it may be tempting to say this candidate is the "best," but this one may not be the one who moves us toward our diversity goal. Because of the systematic advantages that members of the dominant group receive, it is often the case that the person with the extra experience or educational attainment is a person from the majority group. If our eyes are on our organizational goal, we are not

distracted by these unasked-for extras. If we need someone who has toured Europe or had a special internship, it should already be part of our criteria. If it is not part of the criteria, it shouldn't be considered.

And if making our organization a more inclusive environment is a goal, then perhaps we should have that goal reflected in our criteria so that whoever is selected can support the organization's goals. Fletcher Blanchard, author of "Effective Affirmative Action Programs," suggests what some of these new criteria might be: the extent and favorability of one's experience working in multicultural settings, the experience of being supervised by managers of color, experience of collaborating in multicultural workgroups, or living in racially-mixed communities, fluency in a second language, or substantial college coursework in the study of multicultural perspectives.¹⁸

In my own consultation with school systems interested in increasing their faculty of color, we have discussed the need for such new criteria. The number of young people of color entering the teaching profession is still too small to meet the demand. While effective recruiting strategies can increase a school system's likelihood of being able to attract new teachers of color, many White teachers will still be needed to replace retiring teachers in the coming years. Schools concerned about meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population should be looking specifically for teachers of all backgrounds with demonstrated experience in working with multiracial populations, with courses on their transcripts like Psychology of Racism; Race, Class, Culture, and Gender in the Classroom; and Foundations of Multicultural Education, to name a few.

Criteria like these are important for all candidates, but they are also criteria which are more likely to be met by candidates of color, because people of color often have more life experience in multicultural settings than many White people do. However, because such criteria are not explicitly race-based, they are also criteria which should withstand the legal assaults that many affirmative action programs have experienced.¹⁹ Should these legal challenges move us into a post-affirmative action age, such criteria will be increasingly impor-

tant in the search and selection process. Under any circumstance, clarity about organizational goals and qualification criteria will lead to better and more equitable selection decisions.

----- White Disadvantage Revisited

When the dominant identity of Whiteness goes unexamined, racial privilege also goes unacknowledged. Instead, the achievements that unearned privilege make more attainable are seen as just reward for one's own efforts. The sense of entitlement that comes as the result of privileges given and received without notice goes unchallenged. When that sense of entitlement is threatened, it is most often experienced as an unfair personal penalty rather than as a necessary and impersonal leveling of an uneven field. An understanding of what affirmative action is and is not often changes the perception of White disadvantage, especially when coupled with an understanding of White privilege. For example, Stanley Fish, a White man who understands both privilege and past and present patterns of employment discrimination, explains clearly why he believes affirmative action policies are justified even when such policies cost him a job he wanted.

Although I was disappointed, I did not conclude that the situation was "unfair," because the policy was obviously not directed at me . . . the policy was not intended to disenfranchise white males. Rather the policy was driven by other considerations, and it was only as a by-product of those considerations—not as the main goal—that white males like me were rejected. Given that the institution in question has a high percentage of minority students, a very low percentage of minority faculty, and an even lower percentage of minority administrators, it made perfect sense to focus on women and minority candidates, and within that

sense, not as the result of prejudice, my whiteness and maleness became disqualifications. I can hear the objection in advance: "What's the difference? Unfair is unfair: you didn't get the job." . . . It is the difference between an unfairness that befalls one as the unintended effect of a policy rationally conceived and an unfairness that is pursued as an end in itself.²⁰

Are there reasons to resist such an understanding? Absolutely. Describing interviews with "angry White men" from working-class communities, Michele Fine reveals how these men, displaced from jobs by the flight of capital from their cities, blame their misfortune not on corporate greed but on African Americans. Explains Fine, Black people are psychologically "imported to buffer the pain, protest the loss, and still secure the artificial privilege of whiteness."²¹ In a societal context where historically the scapegoating of the "other" has been standard operating procedure, it is easier to do that than critically examine the large structural conditions that have created this situation.

Speaking from her vantage point as a White female psychologist who has studied affirmative action for many years, Faye Crosby comments on this anger: "For those who study affirmative action, the attitudes of angry and frightened White males can provoke some impatience. But to end the impatience and become sympathetic with aspects of the resistance to affirmative action, I need only remember how privilege has blinded me, too."²² Rather than dismissing with disdain those who suffer the illusion of "imaginary white disadvantage," she urges engagement in dialogue. For those who are fatigued by the effort, she offers a good reason to continue. "[M]y fervent support of affirmative action comes ultimately from being the mother of White boy-men. It is because I want a better world for my children that I bother to fight for affirmative action."²³

All of us want a better, more peaceful world for our children. If we want peace, we must work for justice. How do we achieve a more

just society in the present context of institutional and cultural racism? Goal-oriented affirmative action is but one potentially effective strategy. Serious dialogue about other strategies is needed, and that dialogue needs to be expanded beyond the Black-White paradigm that has shaped discussions of affirmative action. The voices of other disenfranchised groups need to be acknowledged in the process, because as my students continually remind me, "Racism is not just a Black-White thing."

Part IV

Beyond Black and White