

## **Ten Myths About Affirmative Action**

**S. Plous**  
**Wesleyan University**

Many supporters view affirmative action as a milestone, many opponents see it as a millstone, and many others regard it as both or neither—as a necessary, but imperfect, remedy for an intractable social disease. The case against affirmative action (may rest heavily in part) on myth and misunderstanding. Here are some of the most popular myths about affirmative action, along with a brief commentary on each one:

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

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

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

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

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

Despite the progress that has been made, the playing field is far from level. Women continue to earn 70 cents for every male dollar. Black people continue to have twice the unemployment rate of White people, half the median family income, and half the proportion who attend four years or more of college. In fact, without affirmative action the percentage of Black students on many campuses would drop below 2%. This would effectively choke off Black access to higher education and severely restrict progress toward racial equality.

### **Myth #4: The public doesn't support affirmative action anymore.**

This myth is based largely on public opinion polls that offer an all-or-none choice between affirmative action as it currently exists and no affirmative action whatsoever. When intermediate choices are added, surveys show that most people want to maintain some form of affirmative action. For example, a recent Time/CNN poll found that 80% of the public felt "affirmative action programs for minorities and women should be continued at some level" (Roper Center, 1995a). What the public opposes are quotas, set asides, and "reverse discrimination." For instance, when the same poll asked people whether they favored programs "requiring businesses to hire a specific number or quota of minorities and women," 63% opposed such a plan. As these results suggest, most members of the public oppose extreme forms of affirmative action that violate notions of procedural justice—they do not oppose affirmative action itself.

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

Government statistics do not support this myth. According to the Commerce Department, there are fewer than 2 million unemployed Black civilians and more than 100 million employed White civilians (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). Thus, even if every unemployed Black worker were to displace a White worker, less than 2 percent of Whites would be affected. Furthermore, affirmative action pertains only to job-qualified applicants, so the actual percentage of affected Whites would be a fraction of 1 percent. The main sources of job loss among White workers have to do with factory relocations and labor contracting outside the United States, computerization and automation, and corporate downsizing (Ivins, 1995).

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

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

**Myth #7: You can't cure discrimination with discrimination.**

The problem with this myth is that it uses the same word—discrimination—to describe two very different things. Job discrimination is grounded in prejudice and exclusion, whereas affirmative action is an effort to overcome prejudicial treatment through inclusion. The most effective way to cure society of exclusionary practices is to make special efforts at inclusion, which is exactly what affirmative action does. The logic of affirmative action is no different than the logic of treating a nutritional deficiency with vitamin supplements. For a healthy person, high doses of vitamin supplements may be unnecessary or even harmful, but for a person whose system is out of balance, supplements are an efficient way to restore the body's balance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Selection among equally qualified candidates.* Survey research suggests that three-quarters of the public does not see this type of affirmative action as discriminatory (Roper Center, 1995d).

... a few general observations can be made. First, the selection of women and minority members among equal or roughly comparable candidates has the greatest public support, adheres most closely to popular conceptions of procedural justice, and reduces the chances that affirmative action beneficiaries will be perceived as unqualified or undeserving (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Nacoste, 1985; Turner & Pratkanis, 1994). Second, the selection of women and minority members among unequal candidates—used routinely in college admissions—has deeply divided the nation (with the strongest opposition coming from White males and conservative voters). The selection of unqualified candidates is not permitted under federal affirmative action guidelines and should not be equated with legal forms of affirmative action. *Copyright © 1996, S. Plous*