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# Perceptions of Discrimination and Need for Affirmative Action Among Asian Americans: Is It Need or Self-Interest?

Vaunne Ma Weathers et Donald M. Truxillo

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 With a growth rate of 45 %, the Asian and Pacific Islander population was the fastest growing ethnic group between 1990-1999 in the U.S., and by extension, in the U.S. workforce (Bell, Harrison, & McLaughlin, 1997; Takagi, 1993; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Between 2000 and 2003, the Asian American and Hispanic population growth rate of nearly 13 % is nearly four times faster than that of the overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Despite these statistics, there is a lack of research on perceptions of Asian Americans as targets of affirmative action (AA). In contrast, there is an abundance of literature on perceptions of women (e.g., Heilman, 1996; Heilman & Alcott, 2001; Summers, 1991), African Americans (Kravitz et al., 1997), and Hispanic Americans (Kravitz & Platanía, 1993) as targets of AA. This is despite the fact that Asian Americans are a protected group under Executive Order 11246 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Moreover, most of the literature has viewed Asians monolithically, not differentiating Asians into subgroups (e.g., national origin, generational status).
- 2 This lack of AA research focused on Asians may be due to several factors. First, because Asians represent less than 4 % of the U.S. population, it can be difficult to obtain Asian samples of sufficient size. Second, Asian Americans have not been as politically active as other American minority groups (e.g., Chew, 1994; Takagi, 1993), and thus they have not received the attention of organizational researchers (Cheng & Thatchenkery, 1997). Third, due to Asians' image as the Model Minority, some people believe that discrimination against Asian Americans is not a problem (Cheng & Thatchenkery, 1997).

- 3 To address these gaps, we examined Asians' perceptions of AA regarding two ethnic groups as targets of AA, Asians and Hispanics. Specifically, within a sample of Asian students we examined the effects of gender, national origin (e.g., Vietnamese, Chinese), generational status (e.g., recent immigrant, second generation), language fluency, and citizenship status on attitudes and beliefs regarding AA for Asians and for Hispanics. Moreover, we examined two competing theoretical perspectives in explaining Asians' perceptions of AA for Asians versus AA for Hispanics, a group traditionally covered by U.S. AA policies. Specifically, we examined whether Asians' perceptions of AA for themselves and Hispanics are more influenced by perceived need (e.g., Deutsch, 1975) or by self-interest (Thibault & Walker, 1975).

#### 1.1 Asian Americans in the Workplace

- 4 Despite some perceptions to the contrary, Asian appear to face certain problems in the U.S. workplace similar to other ethnic minorities. For example, research has shown that Asians have lower career and social returns on investment in education compared to Whites (Friedman & Krackhardt, 1997). Similarly, Duleep and Sanders (1992) found that when adjusted for occupation and industry, highly educated Asian men earned less than their White counterparts. However, although there has been some research on Asian Americans' attitudes toward AA policies (e.g., Bell et al., 1997; Ozawa, Crosby, & Crosby, 1996), perceptions of Asians as *beneficiaries* of AA policies have rarely been studied (see Amirkhan, Betancourt, Graham, Lopez, & Weiner, 1995; Kravitz, Klineberg, Avery, Nguyen, Lund, & Fu, 2000 for exceptions).

#### 1.2 Affirmative Action and Organizational Justice

- 5 As defined by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's (SIOP) subcommittee on AA research, AA refers to "a body of policies and procedures designed to eliminate employment discrimination against women and ethnic minorities, and to redress the effects of past discrimination" (Kravitz et al., 1997, p. vii). Reactions to perceived beneficiaries of AA are recurrent in the literature (e.g., Harrison et al., in press; Kravitz et al., 1997). Much of the controversy surrounding AA springs from the perceived fairness or justice of AA. Typically, discussions of organizational justice emphasize *distributive justice*, or the fairness in the distribution of outcomes, and *procedural justice*, or the fairness of the procedures used to determine the outcome of distributions (Greenberg, 1987). One of the key distributive justice explanations for reactions to AA is *needs*, the idea that outcomes should be based on relative need (Deutsch, 1975). In contrast, a key procedural justice rule that has been used to explain reactions to AA is *self-interest* (e.g., Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Both distributive and procedural justice concepts have been applied to AA research (e.g., Truxillo & Bauer, 1999), and fairness perceptions and attitudes toward AA tend to be correlated (Kravitz et al., 1997).

#### 1.3 The Present Study

- 6 In the present study, we set out to fill several gaps in the AA literature. First, we examined Asian Americans' perceptions of AA, a topic that has received little study. Second, while most of the literature has not differentiated Asians into subgroups (e.g., national origin, generational status), the present study examined the reactions of different Asian subgroups to AA. Specifically, we examined whether different Asian American subgroups perceive differing levels of discrimination against themselves. Third, we examined whether Asians perceived that U.S. AA policies apply to Asians as much as they do to Hispanics, a group that has been more closely associated with AA in

the U.S. Moreover, Hispanics and Asians both face similar types of discrimination in terms of language and immigrant status. Most importantly, we examined whether Asians' attitudes toward AA for themselves and for Hispanics would be better predicted by need or by self-interest approaches to fairness. Specifically, we examined whether Asian Americans perceived a greater need for AA for themselves or for Hispanics, that is, whether Asians considered themselves to be represented in the workplace in comparison to Hispanics; and whether Asians perceived they were adversely affected by selection tests in comparison to Hispanics. We then assessed whether Asians believed that they and Hispanics should benefit from AA, and whether AA for Asians and Hispanics was equally fair. We reasoned that if Asians perceived that Hispanics need AA more than Asians do (in terms of less representation in the workplace, more discrimination, and greater adverse impact on tests), Asians should perceive that AA is more fair for Hispanics than for themselves, and that Hispanics should benefit from AA more than they do. On the other hand, if self-interest guides reactions to AA, Asians should perceive that AA for themselves and for Hispanics is equally fair, and that Asians and Hispanics are equally deserving of AA.

7 In summary, we examined the following questions:

- 1. Do different Asian subgroups (e.g., ethnic subgroup, citizens/non-citizen) perceive different levels of workplace discrimination?
- 2. How much workplace discrimination do Asians perceive that they face relative to Hispanics?
- 3. How much adverse impact in testing do Asians perceive they face relative to Hispanics?
- 4. How well do Asians perceive they are represented in the workplace relative to Hispanics?
- 5. Do Asians perceive they benefit from U.S. AA policies as much as Hispanics do?
- 6. Do Asians perceive that both Asians and Hispanics should benefit from AA? Is AA fair for both groups?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

- 8 Participants were students from a university in the northwestern U.S. who had identified themselves as Asian/Pacific Islander in their admissions records. E-mail requests ( $N = 2044$ ) and follow-up reminders were sent to participants, resulting in 216 responses (response rate = 11 %). Two cases were deleted from the sample because one person did not indicate their race and the other indicated they were Caucasian. The final sample was 20.4 % Chinese ( $N = 44$ ), 17.1 % Vietnamese ( $N = 37$ ), 12 % Japanese ( $N = 26$ ), 10.2 % Korean ( $N = 22$ ), 7.4 % Indian ( $N = 16$ ), 5.6 % Pacific Islander ( $N = 12$ ), and 27.3 % Other ( $N = 59$ ; e.g., Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, bi-racial). Forty-four percent of the sample was born in the U.S., and 66.2 % were raised in the U.S. The majority of the sample (76.9 %) was first-generation in the U.S. (i.e., their parents were not born in the U.S.), 10.6 % indicated that their parents were born in the U.S., 9.3 % indicated that only one of their parents was born in the U.S., and 64.4 % of the sample were U.S. citizens.
- 9 Sixty-three percent of respondents were currently employed, with an average of 21.8 ( $SD = 11.76$ ) hours worked per week, and 60.2 % were planning to seek new employment within 6 months. Furthermore, 92.6 % of the sample intended to work in the U.S. after graduation. Mean full-time work experience was 2.15 years ( $SD = 3.76$ ), while mean part-time work experience was 3.38 years ( $SD = 2.72$ ). The average age of respondents was 23.89 years ( $SD = 5.89$ ), and 65.7 % were female.

### 2.2 Procedure

- 10 Participants were sent an e-mail inviting them to participate in the study and providing them with a URL link to an online survey. The e-mail list was compiled by the University's Office of Institutional Research and Planning and sent out by the Information Technology Office. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were given a brief overview of the study and asked to provide their opinions on different AA issues in the form of a questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. As an incentive for participation, students were offered a chance to be entered in a drawing to win one of two prizes: a Sony CD Walkman or \$50.00 cash.

### 2.3 Measures

- 11 Participants were asked about a number of perceptions relating to AA. They indicated their level of agreement with these perceptual measures on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with the exception of *perceived workplace representation*, which was on a 3-point scale ranging from *under-represented* to *over-represented*. All respondents completed all measures with regard to two target ethnicities (Asian and Hispanic). The scales for each target ethnicity were identical with the exception of the name of the target minority group.
- 12 *2.3.1 Perceived workplace discrimination due to ethnicity.* We used one item to measure respondents' perceptions of whether they have been discriminated against at work due to their ethnicity, "I have faced discrimination in employment due to my ethnicity."
- 13 *2.3.2 Perceived ethnic groups (Asians/Hispanics) that do benefit from AA policies.* We used three items (six items total; Asian as target,  $\alpha = .85$ ; Hispanic as target,  $\alpha = .87$ ) to assess perceptions relating to which ethnic groups do benefit from AA (adapted from Weathers, Hanson, & Truxillo, 2004.) A sample item is "[Asians/Hispanics] benefit from affirmative action policies."
- 14 *2.3.3 Perceived adverse impact in testing for Asians and Hispanics.* Four separate, one-item measures were used to measure participants' perception of [Asians/Hispanics] *adverse impact in standardized employment tests*. These items were "[Asians/Hispanics] score lower than average on standardized employment tests for scientific jobs (e.g., engineers)" and "[Asians/Hispanics] score lower than average on standardized employment tests for management jobs."
- 15 *2.3.4 Perceived workplace representation of Asians and Hispanics.* Two separate, one-item measures were used to measure participants' perception of [Asian/Hispanic] representation in the scientific fields. These items asked participants, "In your opinion, how represented are [Asians/Hispanics] in the scientific fields (e.g., engineers)?" Similarly, two separate, one-item measures were used to measure participants' perception of [Asian/Hispanic] representation in management fields. These items asked participants, "In your opinion, how represented are [Asians/Hispanics] in management jobs?" For each of these four items, participants indicated whether they thought the group was under-represented, adequately-represented, or over-represented by putting a check next to the appropriate box. Responses to these items were then coded on a scale of 0 (under-represented) to 2 (over represented).
- 16 *2.3.5 Attitude toward AA for Asians and for Hispanics.* We used five items to assess respondents' support for AA targeted at each ethnic group (10 items total; Asian as target,  $\alpha = .93$  and Hispanic as target,  $\alpha = .96$ ) adapted from Weathers, Hanson, and

Truxillo (2003.) A sample item is "I think [Asians/Hispanics] deserve to benefit from affirmative action."

- 17 2.3.6 Overall fairness of AA for Asians and for Hispanics. Six items were used to assess the overall fairness of AA for each ethnic group (twelve items total; Asian as target,  $\alpha = .95$ ; Hispanic as target,  $\alpha = .97$ ) adapted from Truxillo and Bauer (Study 3, 1999).

- 18 2.3.7 Demographic information. Participants were asked to provide information such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, generational status, English language proficiency, whether they speak English with a non-American accent, employment status, hours worked per week, job seeking intentions, and years of work experience.

### 3. Results

- 19 In order to test our study questions, we used t-test comparisons and one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA). Because gender has been shown to predict AA perceptions in previous research (see Kravitz et al., 1997), it was used as the covariate in ANCOVA analyses.

#### 3.1 Do Different Asian Subgroups Perceive Different Levels of Workplace Discrimination?

- 20 T-test comparisons showed that Asian respondents who were not born in the U.S. reported higher levels of workplace discrimination ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) than those who were born in the U.S. ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(203) = 2.36$ ,  $p < .05$ . Similarly, respondents who were not U.S. citizens reported experiencing more workplace discrimination ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) than those who were U.S. citizens ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(200) = 2.76$ ,  $p < .01$ .

- 21 Results of a series of ANCOVAs showed that Asians' perceived workplace discrimination did not differ as a function of Asian ethnic subgroup,  $F(6, 205) = 0.65$  ns, or self-described English language proficiency,  $F(2, 204) = 2.01$ , ns. However, respondents describing themselves with different levels of non-American accent differed in terms of perceived workplace discrimination,  $F(2, 186) = 3.20$ ,  $p < .05$ . Specifically, those who described themselves as having a strong accent reported higher levels of workplace discrimination ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SE = 0.36$ ) than those with no accent ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ).

#### 3.2 How Much Discrimination Do Asians Perceive They Face Relative to Hispanics?

- 22 Our sample of Asians perceived that Hispanics ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) face significantly more discrimination in scientific fields than do Asians ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ),  $t(201) = -5.58$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, respondents did not perceive differences between Asians and Hispanics in terms of discrimination in management jobs,  $t(201) = 1.17$ , ns.

#### 3.3 How Much Adverse Impact in Testing Do Asians Perceive They Face Relative to Hispanics?

- 23 Our respondents perceived that Hispanics ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) face significantly more adverse impact in testing for scientific fields than do Asians ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ),  $t(200) = -10.34$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, they perceived that Hispanics ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) face significantly more adverse impact in testing for management fields than do Asians ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $t(200) = -5.61$ ,  $p < .01$ .

#### 3.4 How Well Do Asians Believe They Are Represented in the Workplace Relative to Hispanics?

- 24 Our Asian respondents perceived that Hispanics ( $M = 0.22$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ) were significantly less represented in the scientific fields compared to Asians ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ),  $t(183) =$

10.33,  $p < .01$ . However, they did not perceive differences between Asians' and Hispanics' representation in management fields  $t(187) = 0.25$ , *ns*.

### 3.5 Do Asians Believe That They Benefit from AA Policies as Much as Hispanics Do?

- 25 Our sample of Asian respondents perceived that Hispanics ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) do benefit significantly more from AA than do Asians ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ),  $t(201) = -5.43$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### 3.6 Do Asians Perceive That They and Hispanics Should Benefit from AA? Do They Believe that AA Is Fair for Both Groups?

- 26 Finally, our sample of Asian respondents did not perceive that Asians and Hispanics should differentially benefit from AA,  $t(201) = 0.92$ , *ns*. Similarly, respondents did not hold different perceptions of the fairness of AA for Asians versus Hispanics  $t(197) = 0.89$ , *ns*.

## 4. Discussion

- 27 The present study makes several key contributions to the AA literature. First, we examined Asian Americans' perceptions of AA, a group that is generally ignored in the AA literature. Second, we examined different subgroups of Asian respondents and found differences among them regarding perceived discrimination. Third, we examined Asians' perceptions of the relative need for AA for themselves and for Hispanics in terms of workplace representation and adverse impact on tests. Finally, we examined whether Asians' perceptions of AA for themselves relative to Hispanics could be explained more by need-based or self-interest approaches to fairness. We found evidence that despite Asians' perceptions that Hispanics need AA more than they do in terms of adverse impact on tests, and in terms of discrimination and representation in science professions, they believed that Asians and Hispanics should both receive AA. These results suggest that self-interest, rather than need, may have been driving perceptions of AA in this sample.
- 28 Our results showed that Asian subgroups hold different perceptions of whether they have been discriminated against. Specifically, respondents who were not born in the U.S. and who were not U.S. citizens reported higher levels of workplace discrimination than their U.S.-born and citizen counterparts. Similarly, respondents describing themselves as having a strong accent reported higher levels of workplace discrimination than those who reported no accent. These results are important: Although these Asian subgroups have received relatively little scrutiny in the AA literature, they perceive that they have been discriminated against. These findings confirm the results of past studies which suggest different employment outcomes for different Asian subgroups (Friedman & Krackhardt, 1997, Tang, 1997). These finding also suggest that future research should continue to examine the challenges faced by these Asian subgroups, and that organizational decision-makers should pay particular attention to potential discrimination against such subgroups in hiring. For example, organizations should consider training their HR staff to be sensitive to potential bias in hiring based on accent, and research should examine the effectiveness of such programs in reducing discrimination. Finally, we note that this study did not find any differences among Asian ethnic subgroups in perceived discrimination. However, we recommend that future research continue to examine this issue with larger Asian samples.
- 29 In addition, our results provide insights into the debate over whether reactions to AA can be better explained by self-interest (e.g., Thibaut and Walker, 1975) or by perceived



need (e.g., Deutsch, 1975). Our sample of Asians generally perceived that Hispanics are less represented in the workplace, less represented in science professions, and face more discrimination than Asians do. Nevertheless, they perceived that Asians and Hispanics should benefit equally from AA, and that AA for these two groups was equally fair. While this may be partly due the fact that Asians perceived that they and Hispanics face similar challenges in management jobs, it also suggests that support for AA was affected by self-interest (e.g., Kravitz et al., 1997). This is similar to the finding that Black and White Americans' perceptions of test score "banding" (used to interpret selection test scores) is largely determined by the outcomes that they perceive they will receive from it (e.g., Truxillo & Bauer, 1999). These results also suggest that the implementation of AA is fraught with challenges: Those who perceive that they will receive a less positive outcome from AA compared to others may react negatively to it, even if others are perceived to face a greater need in terms of discrimination. Future research should examine methods for reducing these negative reactions to AA, perhaps by more clearly demonstrating the need that certain groups have for AA.

#### 4.1 Limitations

- 30 This study is not without limitations. First, we used a student sample for our research. Although the majority of our sample had either worked in the past or was currently working, a college student sample may not capture the perceptions of all Asians. Second, our response rate was low; this could lead to biased responding, such that only those with the strongest opinions on the topic of AA may have responded to our survey. Third, we did not assess what participants believed AA actually involved. AA has a wide range of definitions (e.g., Kravitz et al., 1997), and can mean anything from increased recruiting to quotas (which are now illegal in the U.S.) It is possible that reactions to AA for different groups would vary as a function of what respondents believed was meant by AA. Fourth, we were not able to get large enough samples of certain Asian subgroups. Future research should focus more attention on these subgroups and their perceptions of AA.
- 31 Since its inception in 1965, AA has been a controversial issue in the United States and a highly debated topic in many fields of study. The present study adds to the literature by examining the perceptions of a subgroup rarely examined in this literature, Asian Americans. Specifically, we examined the reactions of Asian subgroups to AA. Most importantly, we examined whether reactions to AA seemed to be guided more by self-interest or perceived need, a perennial debate in the AA literature (e.g., Kravitz et al., 1997). We encourage more research in this area so that by better understanding reactions to AA such programs can be implemented more effectively.

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## RÉSUMÉS

Bien que les personnes d'origine asiatique forment le groupe minoritaire ethnique ayant la plus forte croissance aux Etats-Unis, leurs points de vue ont fait l'objet de peu d'attention dans la littérature sur les actions positives (AA). Nous avons examiné les perceptions d'asiatiques en utilisant un échantillon de 216 étudiants du nord-ouest des Etats-Unis. Nous avons trouvé que les asiatiques perçoivent des degrés différents de discrimination en fonction du degré auquel ils parlent avec un accent perceptible, de leur statut de nationalité, et de leur génération d'installation aux Etats-Unis. Des personnes ne possédant pas la nationalité américaine et nées hors les Etats-Unis ont fait état d'une plus importante discrimination dans l'emploi et avaient des attitudes plus favorables à l'égard des AA pour les asiatiques. Les participants ont pensé que les asiatiques avaient un accès plus important à certains postes et qu'ils avaient de meilleures performances aux tests de recrutement que des personnes d'origine hispanique. Néanmoins, ils ont pensé que les asiatiques et les hispaniques devaient tous les deux bénéficier des AA et que les AA ayant comme cible chacun de ces groupes avaient un niveau de justice semblable. Nous commentons les résultats en termes des explications rivales venant des approches de justice dites égoïste ou fondée dans les besoins.

Although Asians are one of the fastest-growing ethnic minority groups in the U.S., their views have received little scrutiny in the of affirmative action (AA) literature. We examined Asians' perceptions of AA using a sample of 216 college students in the northwestern U.S. We found that Asians perceived different levels of discrimination as a function of their accent level, citizenship status, and generational status. Non-U.S. citizens and Asians not born in the U.S. reported more workplace discrimination and had more positive attitudes toward AA for Asians. Interestingly, Asians believed that Asians have greater access to certain jobs and believed they performed better on employment tests than Hispanics. Nevertheless, they believed that both Asians and Hispanics deserve to benefit from AA, and they perceived that AA targeting each of these groups was equally fair. These results are discussed in terms of the competing explanations of self-interest versus need-based fairness.

## INDEX

**Keywords** : discrimination, organizational justice, affirmative action, asians, employment

**Mots-clés** : justice organisationnelle, action positive, asiatiques, emploi

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