

Winter 2016

# Beyond Reparation: Affirmative Action as a Solution for Disparate Representation

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## Recommended Citation

Cardenas-Gomez, Suny, "Beyond Reparation: Affirmative Action as a Solution for Disparate Representation" (2016). *Student Research*. 3.

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ENGL 103, Section A

29 February 2016

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Representation

Attorney Brian Stevenson tells the story of how, while awaiting his client in the courtroom, the judge entered, saw him, and told him to get out and wait for his lawyer. The judge, who had no factors to judge Stevenson by except his appearance, assumed he, a black man, must be the accused. Both the supporters and the opponents of affirmative action agree that this kind of discrimination must end. The issue is whether affirmative action promotes or alleviates discrimination. A significant body of evidence supports Sabbagh's assessment of the need for affirmative action to dismantle the racial hierarchy that perpetuates discrimination (1665-1681). Affirmative action policy is important because it enables minority groups to redesign their ethnic profiles by reducing occupational segregation, which transforms the way society views these groups, and makes merit-based evaluations possible.

Opponents of affirmative action policy argue that it actually promotes discrimination. By giving individuals an advantage based on their race and not on

their merits, they contend, affirmative action creates injustice (Driscoll and Newton 2). But, in reality, selection processes are often inherently discriminatory, especially in the job market. Minorities are significantly disadvantaged because of their race. Because of prejudices that have deep historical roots, profiling is bound to occur, even unconsciously. For example, a study conducted for the National Bureau of Economic Research sent resumes with varying levels of qualification to business that had posted openings in Chicago and Boston newspapers. The study used four names, two “white” names, Emily and Greg, and two “black names,” Lakisha and Jamal. On average, applicants with “black” names had to send five more resumes than applicants with “white” names in order to be contacted for an interview (Bertrand and Mullainathan 991). This study reveals that factors besides qualifications seriously impact an individual’s opportunities. The resumes varied in levels of skill, with different qualifications randomly assigned to one of the four applicant names, so the applicant pool did contain black and white applicants who were both highly qualified. However, even among those worthy candidates, “white” name applicants benefitted more from their credentials. There was a 30% increase in callbacks for highly qualified “white” applicants as opposed to less qualified “white” candidates, but the difference was not nearly as meaningful for highly qualified “black” applicants (Bertrand and Mullainathan 991).

Evidently, factors other than qualifications and merit are at work in this selection process. The discrimination uncovered in resume study is caused by stereotype-driven perceptions of minority groups. Even for individuals who do not identify as racist, many prejudices exist, almost unconsciously, because of prevailing stereotypes. In their research of the relationship between race-based stereotypes and professional evaluations, Gilbert and Ivancevich surveyed 317 undergraduate students. Each participant received an identical employee profile that differed only in the employee's photograph. The questionnaires included male and female whites and blacks. Results revealed that black women were perceived to be the least emotionally stable, and that both black men and women were seen as less serious about work than their Caucasian counterparts (Gilbert and Ivancevich 136-149). Since the profiles were identical in terms of qualifications, the race demonstrated by the photograph played a crucial role in the differences that arose between the way participants viewed the employees. Not only did the results reflect stereotypes, they demonstrate how these stereotypes translate into potentially inhibiting perceptions for professional individuals.

Stereotype-based perceptions both originate from and proliferate from what researchers Rio and Alonso-Villar term "occupational segregation" in their research. That research charted the ways occupational segregation benefitted or damaged different racial groups financially between 1940-2010. Rio and Alonso-

Villar say that, after an initial drop between 1940 and 1980, occupational segregation on the basis of race has been on the rise. Using an index that measured, “the (per capita) loss/gain of each member of the group derived from the occupational segregation of the group,” the study found that black and Hispanic populations experience significant profit loss because of occupational segregation. When taking into account affirmative action, the study found that it did benefit the wage index of black males for a while, but that improvement disappeared along with the focus on affirmative action policy. Not only does occupational segregation result in stereotypes, it actually has a tangible, monetary influence on minority groups.

In the years since this study was conducted, occupational segregation is still alive and well. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that in 2015, 50.7% of ‘miscellaneous agricultural workers’ were Hispanic, hugely disproportionate to the 4.3% of Hispanic “agricultural managers.” Also considerable is the likelihood of encountering a black bus driver (28.0%) when compared to that meeting a black physician or surgeon (6.4%). There is a huge overrepresentation of minorities in low-wage, often low-skill service positions and a corresponding underrepresentation in jobs that pay well and require many years of education. Since the division into not only job types, but also professional strata

by race is still widespread, there is still a need for a change in minority presence to transform public perception.

When properly executed, affirmative action policy would eventually outlive its own usefulness. Society will never perceive minority groups differently until they are visible in a variety of occupations, particularly professional and managerial settings where they are not currently present, and affirmative action is necessary to enable that social mobility. As the opportunities affirmative action makes available to minority groups increases their representation in professional settings where they are currently absent, public perception will begin to change, and with it race-based stereotypes that influence evaluations. Affirmative Action does not give an unfair advantage to people by evaluating them on qualification-independent variables. Rather, it counteracts the stigma that already prompts people to evaluate minorities on the basis of their race.

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