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Support for employment equity policies: A self-enhancement approach

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of employment equity (EE) policies has been hindered by negative reactions to these policies. We draw on the self-enhancement literature to expand self-interest accounts of reactions to EE policies to explain inconsistent findings showing that both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries react negatively to EE policies. Across four studies, we found that self-image threat influences reactions to gender-based EE policies. Studies 1 and 2 established that EE policies threaten the self-images of both men (nonbeneficiaries) and women (beneficiaries). Study 3 found that those least likely to experience self-image threat when faced with a gender-based EE policy are the most likely to show positive reactions to EE policies, while Study 4 showed that both men and women react more favorably to EE policies when self-images threats are mitigated through a self-affirmation task. Implications for our understanding of reactions to EE policies are discussed.

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Introduction

At the dawn of the 21st century, women and racial minorities continue to face barriers in the workplace that hinder their career advancement. Women hold only 16.1% of board seats and 7.5% of top earning positions in companies, while women and minority men hold only 28.74% of board seats at Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2011). To address these inequalities, employment equity (EE)¹ policies, which aim to reduce discrimination and increase the hiring of disadvantaged groups, have been implemented in many countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India, Malaysia, South Africa, and the United States (Sowell, 2004). Despite the positive and socially beneficial goals of EE policies, considerable research documents that employees react negatively to EE policies (see Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006, for a meta-analysis). This presents a problem for organizations and governments that mandate these policies, as without the support of employees, such policies tend to be ineffective (Hitt & Keats, 1984; Nacoste & Hummels, 1994).

To account for how individuals react to EE policies, past research has frequently invoked self-interest as one prominent factor influencing employees' reactions (Harrison et al., 2006; Kluegel & Smith, 1983; Lehman & Crano, 2002). According to the self-interest

argument, *nonbeneficiaries*, people who do not stand to benefit from the policies (e.g., men and Whites), react negatively to EE policies because EE policies go against their self-interest by hurting their employment and career prospects. By contrast, *beneficiaries*, people who do stand to benefit (e.g., women and racial minorities) should react positively to EE policies because such policies increase beneficiaries' employment and career prospects, which is in line with their self-interest. Yet, many studies have shown that beneficiaries do not have uniformly positive reactions to EE policies. Some studies find that beneficiaries react positively to EE policies (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006; Kravitz & Platania, 1993), while others find that beneficiaries react negatively to EE policies (e.g., Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Matheson, Echenberg, Taylor, & Rivers, 1994). Thus, while a self-interest argument may partially explain reactions to EE policies it seemingly cannot in and of itself explain both nonbeneficiaries' and beneficiaries' reactions to EE policies.

Although these findings may be taken to indicate that a self-interest framework for reactions to EE policies is invalid (at least for beneficiaries), we argue instead that a more nuanced view of self-interest is required to account for why beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries alike hold negative views of EE policies. In particular, past work has primarily defined self-interest in *material* terms, meaning that EE policies have tangible material consequences such as providing (for beneficiaries) or limiting (for nonbeneficiaries) employment opportunities. However, self-interest involves considering both what is best for one's material self-interest as well as one's *psychological* self-interest (Miller, 1999; Ratner & Miller,

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E-mail addresses: ihideg@wlu.ca (I. Hideg), duf14@psu.edu (D.L. Ferris).¹ In the United States the equivalent term is affirmative action. Given that our studies were conducted in the context of Canadian employment equity policies, we use the term employment equity throughout this paper.

2001). Building on this notion, we suggest that reactions to EE policies may also be driven by the fundamental human desire for self-enhancement (Ferris, Lian, Brown, Pang, & Keeping, 2010; Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Sedikides, 1993). In particular, reactions to EE policies may be negative because such policies invoke a *self-image threat*, or a threat to the overall worth and integrity of the self (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sedikides, 1993). For nonbeneficiaries, EE policies uniformly imply that their success is a result of biased systems, which threatens their self-image of being competent and skilled individuals. For beneficiaries, the nature of the self-image threat differs: EE policies introduce the possibility of failing to secure a job despite the provision of explicit advantages in hiring, which similarly threatens their self-image of being competent and skilled. As a result, both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries may react negatively to EE policies as a means of maintaining positive self-images – which ultimately serves their psychological self-interest and desire for positive self-regard.

We provide converging evidence that self-image threat plays a role in negative reactions to EE policies across four studies using gender-based EE policies. First, Studies 1 and 2 establish that EE policies threaten the self-images of both men (nonbeneficiaries) and women (beneficiaries), and that the nature of the self-image threats differs for men and women. Then, Studies 3 and 4 use a moderation-of-process design (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005) to provide more direct evidence that self-image threats underlie negative reactions to EE policies. Moderation-of-process designs employ moderators of the underlying psychological process (self-image threat) and observe whether the effects seen on dependent variables differ as a function of the moderator. In our studies, variables that mitigate the self-image threat EE policies represent should therefore mitigate negative reactions to EE policies. In particular, Study 3 examines a moderator that uniquely alleviates self-image threat for beneficiaries (inter-viewing self-efficacy) while Study 4 experimentally mitigates the self-image threat to both men and women through use of a self-affirmation paradigm. In using this variety of methods, our set of studies provides compelling triangulation regarding the presence of self-image threat processes underlying reactions to EE policies.

Our paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, at a theoretical level, we expand the perspective of what should be considered in one's self-interest when applying a self-interest framework to reactions to EE policies. We do so by applying a self-enhancement perspective to elucidate psychological self-interest as an additional concern above and beyond material self-interest. Second, in applying this theoretical insight we provide a lens with which to understand the paradox of why both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries of EE policies demonstrate negative reactions to EE policies. Our work also reconciles inconsistent findings regarding beneficiaries' positive or negative reactions to EE policies by identifying an important moderator of how beneficiaries react to EE policies. Third, at an empirical level our paper provides converging evidence for the role of self-image threat across multiple studies and methodologies. Finally, our findings point to applied interventions governments and organizations can implement as a way to mitigate negative reactions to EE policies.

Past research on reactions to EE policies

EE policies have become important tools for reducing discrimination against and increasing employment opportunities for women, racial minorities, and other disadvantaged groups worldwide (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Tougas & Beaton, 1993). For example, in Canada groups protected under EE policies are women, racial minorities, aboriginal people, and individuals with disabilities (Jain, Sloane, Horwitz, Taggar, & Weiner, 2003), and in the United States protected groups are women, racial minorities, individuals with disabilities, Vietnam era veterans, and special

disabled veterans (Spann, 2000). The basic premise of EE policies is that beneficiaries of the policies have prospered less in the past, in part owing to systemic advantages and privileges provided to nonbeneficiaries of the policies. EE policies are meant to address these inequalities by giving beneficiaries an advantage in employment systems. Supporting their effectiveness, EE policies have been shown to increase diversity in the workplace, with past research finding that relative to other policies and initiatives designed to promote diversity (e.g., diversity training), EE policies lead to increases in managerial diversity (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). Yet, the effectiveness of EE policies and their full potential has been seriously undermined by negative reactions from both nonbeneficiaries and beneficiaries of EE policies (Hitt & Keats, 1984; Nacoste & Hummels, 1994).

Meta-analytic research suggests two broad categories of causes of negative reactions to EE policies: policy type and perceiver characteristics (Harrison et al., 2006). Policy type refers to the degree to which EE policies consider applicants' disadvantaged group status, ranging from policies that use group status to decide between two equally qualified candidates (i.e., a *weak preference policy*), to policies that give preference to disadvantaged groups with less regard to qualifications (i.e., a *strong preference policy*; Harrison et al., 2006). Past research suggests that reactions become increasingly negative as EE policies assign greater consideration to disadvantaged group status with little regard to candidate qualifications (Harrison et al., 2006; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995a). However, such strong preference policies are illegal in most countries (Pyburn, Ployhart, & Kravitz, 2008), which has led researchers to call for more research on reactions to legal, weak preference policies (Harrison et al., 2006). Consistent with this perspective, our studies employ legal weak preference EE policies.

The second category of causes of negative reactions, perceiver characteristics (e.g., race and gender), uses perceiver characteristics to indicate the extent to which the perceiver will benefit from or be harmed by the EE policy. This category typically reflects research conducted using a material self-interest framework for understanding negative reactions to EE policies (Harrison et al., 2006; Tougas & Beaton, 1993). Namely, those individuals who by virtue of their gender or race do not materially benefit from these policies (i.e., nonbeneficiaries) typically have negative reactions to EE policies because these policies harm their employment and career prospects. In line with these predictions, past research has found that men and Whites have negative reactions to EE policies (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006; Hideg, Michela, & Ferris, 2011).

By contrast, individuals who materially benefit from these policies (i.e., beneficiaries) should have positive reactions to EE policies because these policies advance their self-interest by increasing employment opportunities and enhancing career prospects. In line with these predictions, studies have found some evidence that women and racial minorities hold favorable attitudes towards EE policies (e.g., Harrison et al., 2006; Kravitz & Platania, 1993). However, inconsistent findings have also emerged. In the context of gender-based EE policies, Kidder et al. (2004) found that women reacted just as negatively to EE policies as men; Fletcher and Chalmers (1991) reported equally unfavorable attitudes toward EE policies among women and men; and Matheson et al. (1994) found that women opposed EE policies even when they were told that women are discriminated against in hiring. Similarly, in the context of race-based EE policies Kravitz and Klineberg (2000) found no differences between Hispanics' and Whites' attitudes toward weak preference EE policies; and Konrad and Linnehan (1995b) found that both racial minorities and Whites had low organizational commitment towards organizations that had the highest percentage of race-based EE policies. These findings suggest that despite the fact that EE policies are inherently advancing the material self-interest of beneficiaries, beneficiaries can still react negatively to EE policies.

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