

Attitudes toward Affirmative Action Programs: A Q Methodological Study

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Abstract: *This study examined the structure and content of attitudes toward affirmative action programs, including preferential hiring based on gender or minority group status. Ninety-seven individuals recruited from the community (51 women, 43 men, 3 of unspecified gender), were presented with 70 statements obtained in a telephone survey of attitudes toward affirmative action programs. They sorted the statements on an 11-point scale ranging from -5 (least like my point of view) to +5 (most like my point of view). The Q sorts were factor analyzed using principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Three interpretable factors emerged. Factor 1 was defined by 15 women and 28 men. The group expressed strong negative reactions to affirmative action programs, focusing mainly on qualifications and merit of candidates. Factor 2 was defined by 22 women and 6 men. In contrast to the first group, participants on this factor were in favor of affirmative action programs, a position that appeared to be based on recognition of inequality in the work place and the need for change. Finally, Factor 3 was defined by 7 women and 6 men, whose attitudes seemed to be based primarily on the denial of disadvantage. Despite the fact that affirmative action policies have been in effect for as long as 30 years, only a relatively small proportion of respondents appeared to understand the need for and goals of these policies. Results of this research provide new insights and a basis for work to change misconceptions about affirmative action. Comparisons between a single-item attitude measure and the 3 perspectives represented in this study help to illustrate the usefulness of Q methodology in subjective studies.*

Introduction

Over the past 3 decades, North American legislators have enacted laws mandating employment equity in the private and public sectors. Affirmative action programs are the primary means by which employment equity policies generally aim to reduce systemic discrimination and enhance employment opportunities for members of visible minority groups, aboriginal peoples, women, and individuals with disabilities. Despite the laudable intentions and ideals on which these policies are based, they continue to be controversial,

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creating considerable debate among academics, politicians, and members of the general public. Indeed, Miller, Reyes, and Shaffer expressed concern that "...opposition [to these programs] is being argued more forcefully and will, no doubt, result in continued and protracted debates...and possibly a reversal of the policy," citing examples of recent Court decisions in the U.S.; e.g., Proposition 209 to eliminate affirmative action in the state of California (1997, 225). This same trend is also evident in Canada, where 1 of the key issues in the platform of the winning political party in a provincial election was to repeal the Employment Equity Act (Ontario, Bill 79, passed in 1993). It is interesting to note that the new act, passed in December 1995, is called the Job Quotas Repeal Act. While this title reflects a popular objection to affirmative action programs (i.e., employers will be forced to hire unqualified people to meet quotas), it does not accurately represent the content of the original Act.

A considerable amount of research has shown that attitudes toward employment equity/affirmative action programs, particularly those involving preferential treatment tend to be negative (Fletcher and Chalmers 1991; Heilman 1994; Tougas and Beaton 1993). Some research, however, has described circumstances in which attitudes toward these policies are fairly positive (Tickamyer, Scollay, Bokemeier, and Wood 1989; Tougas, Beaton, and Veilleux 1991; Tougas and Veilleux 1989). Although affirmative action has been shown to reduce and/or eliminate employment opportunity barriers for targeted groups (e.g., Holzer and Neumark 2000; Nacoste 1989), it can also have negative psychological effects, such as lowered self-esteem, on those who benefit from these policies (Garcia, Erskine, Hawn, and Casmay 1981; Heilman 1994; Heilman, Simon, and Repper 1987). Despite evidence to the contrary (Holzer and Neumark 2000), others unfortunately tend to view individuals believed to have been hired or promoted through affirmative action as less competent and less qualified (Garcia, *et al.* 1981; Heilman 1994; Heilman, Block, and Lucas 1992; Summers 1991). Moreover, co-workers' beliefs about how affirmative action beneficiaries actually obtained their positions may adversely affect the way the beneficiaries' work is evaluated and how beneficiaries feel about their work (Nacoste and Lehman 1987). Similarly, Maio and Esses (1998) have shown that it is not merely individual beneficiaries of affirmative action who are viewed negatively, but that entire groups targeted by such programs are also perceived less favorably.

Despite the unpopularity of affirmative action programs, they have been widely implemented, and their success is evident in the increased representation of targeted groups in the professions and in management (Hacker 1992; Hancock and Kalb 1995, as cited in Miller, *et al.* 1997). However, according to Miller, *et al.* (1997), "Affirmative action ... is still needed to continue leveling the playing field" (p. 227). It is, therefore, important to reduce potential discontent among those who are intended to

benefit as well as those who may feel deprived by such policies. One way of accomplishing this goal is by means of programs aimed at clarifying affirmative action policies and persuading people that employment equity is a desirable and necessary goal (Pace and Smith 1995). The success of employment equity programs depends on a clear understanding of beliefs about, and attitudes toward, affirmative action (Little, Murry, and Wimbush 1998). If, as Pace and Smith (1995) have argued, even those charged with administering affirmative action policies tend to misunderstand and misinterpret the policies, it should not be surprising to find that members of the general public fall prey to the same misunderstandings. For example, there is a widespread notion that the qualifications and merit of individuals hired under affirmative action programs are not considered sufficiently, a notion that has been discussed and refuted in the literature (e.g., Holzer and Neumark 2000; Pace and Smith 1995). There is also evidence to suggest that many continue to believe, erroneously, that racism and sexism are no longer issues in the work place (e.g., Miller, Reyes, and Shaffer 1997).

Typically, attitudes toward affirmative action programs are assessed by means of an aggregated score on a multiple item scale (e.g., Niemann & Dovidio 1998; Tougas *et al.* 1991), yielding information on the strength and direction (positive/negative) of attitudes, but little on the content of attitudes. Thus, this Q methodological study was conducted to try to elucidate the subjective aspects of individual beliefs about, and attitudes toward, affirmative action programs involving preferential treatment of targeted groups.

Methods

Concourse and Q Sample

Statements used in this study were sampled from a concourse generated by means of random telephone surveys conducted with approximately 200 individuals in 2 Canadian communities. One community uses preferential treatment programs to enhance employment opportunities for indigenous people (Perrino 1994); in the other, such programs are less visible (Joachim 1993). Following a brief introduction by the researcher, a description of the purpose of the survey (i.e., soliciting opinions about affirmative action programs), and assurance of respondents' anonymity, those who agreed to continue were read a more complete description of the study. "Some Affirmative Action programs involve preferential treatment of certain groups of people such as women and minorities. For example, a company may follow guidelines to ensure that a certain percentage of the employees are from these targeted groups." The interviewer noted verbatim responses to the question, "What is your opinion about such Affirmative Action programs; that is, those that involve preferential treatment?" Respondents were then asked to elaborate on the reasons for their opinions and respond to questions about their

knowledge and personal experience regarding affirmative action programs. The authors independently organized the responses into a concourse of logical categories. The concourse was jointly edited and sampled to arrive at the Q set of 70 statements presented in the Appendix. The statements were placed into 7 general categories to characterize the nature of the reasons given: recognition/rectification of past injustice, fairness, discrimination, equality of opportunity, effects on beneficiary, role of merit/qualifications in hiring, and personal experience/self-reference.

Participants and Recruitment

Newspaper advertisements, announcements on local radio and television stations, and posters (placed around the university, in supermarkets, and on community bulletin boards) invited people to participate in a study on attitudes toward work issues. The recruitment posters and advertisements included a request that interested persons telephone the researchers for further information on the study. When the telephone was unattended, callers were greeted by an answering machine message identifying the study, thanking them for their interest, and asking them to leave their first name and telephone number. All callers (N = 107) were contacted by a research assistant, who described the study as follows: "The purpose of this study is to examine people's attitudes toward affirmative action programs. Affirmative action programs are designed to improve employment opportunities for certain groups of people. Often, affirmative action programs involve preferential treatment of certain groups of people, including women, indigenous persons, members of minority groups, and persons with disabilities. For example, a company may follow guidelines to ensure that a certain percentage of its employees are from these targeted groups. We are particularly interested in how people feel about these preferential treatment policies. We have already surveyed approximately 200 people over the phone about their opinions of such preferential treatment programs. After the survey, we wrote the reasons people gave for and against these policies on index cards. There are 70 different cards, on each of which is typed a statement about affirmative action programs including preferential treatment. You will be asked to go through these cards and sort them according to your own opinion. There is no right or wrong way to sort these cards. We are simply interested in understanding how people feel about these programs. You will also be asked to complete a questionnaire. In all, this will take about an hour to an hour and a half."

Ninety-seven participants (51 women, 43 men, 3 gender unspecified) were recruited from the community. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 59 years (mean = 30.6 years, SD = 11.3 years), and were generally well educated. Self-reports indicated that 15 respondents had a university degree; 43 had some university education; 21 attended or completed a technical/community college program; 10 completed high school; and 8 had not completed high school.

Annual income reported for this sample ranged from less than \$15,000¹ (16 participants) to \$50,000 or greater (24 participants); median income was "between \$30,000 and \$34,999." Thirty-two of the respondents were university students, while the remainder reported a wide variety of occupations including truck driver, teacher, rehabilitation officer, nurse, broadcaster, computer technician, housewife, sales clerk, entrepreneur, and laborer. Information on participants' race/ethnicity/disability status was not gathered on the advice of the ethics review committee.

Procedure

Participants were invited to come to the university at a convenient date and time. Upon arrival, each participant completed and signed an informed consent form describing the study and stating that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Each participant was given a \$10 honorarium at the beginning of the study, which was theirs to keep regardless of whether or not they completed the tasks. None withdrew from the study. Participants were then instructed in how to conduct the sorting. Specifically, each was handed a deck of 70 cards on which the statements had been printed. Before them was placed an eleven-point scale with numbers ranging from -5 (least like my point of view) to +5 (most like my point of view). The midpoint of the scale, 0, was labeled "irrelevant to my point of view." They were asked first to sort the cards into 3 piles (least like my point of view, irrelevant, most like my point of view)², and then to sort and resort the cards, using a quasi-normal distribution (-5 and +5, 2 items; -4 and +4, 4 items; -3 and +3, 6 items; -2 and +2, 8 items; -1 and +1, 10 items; and 0, 10 items)³ until they were satisfied that they had modeled their point of view on affirmative action. They were encouraged to ask questions at any time. Following the Q sort, participants completed a questionnaire to provide additional information, including demographic data (age, education, income, occupation), a single item to assess attitude toward affirmative action programs on a 5-point scale (where 1 = not at all in favor and 5 = very much in favor), and a variety of other measures not relevant to this paper. Finally, participants were interviewed and asked to comment on their Q sorts and on any other aspect of the study.

Results

One hundred individuals agreed to come to the university to participate in the study; 98 kept their appointments: The 2 individuals who did not arrive at the

¹ All currency figures are denominated in Canadian dollars.

² Although the customary labeling of the Q sort response continuum endpoints is "most unlike" and "most like," we used "least like" and "most like" to label the endpoints. However, in our verbal instructions to participants, we made it clear that they should place cards that were contrary to their viewpoint on the negative side of the scale.

³ Participants who expressed concerns about using the normal distribution were permitted to sort the items in free format.

appointed time and place were contacted again, but declined to reschedule. Data from 1 person, who placed all the cards on either +5 or -5, despite encouragement to sort further, were discarded.

An initial principal components analysis, using PQMethod software (V2.09, Schmolck, 2000)⁴ yielded 8 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. Several possible varimax-rotated solutions were examined and a 3-factor model chosen as the most parsimonious and interpretable. This decision was based on the proportion of variance accounted for by the factors, the number of defining sorts for each factor, the composite reliability of the factors, and the interpretability of the resulting factors. The 3 factors, which accounted for 51% of the variance, were defined by 43, 28, and 13 respondents (i.e., individuals who loaded significantly⁵ on *only* 1 factor (see Brown, 1980)), respectively, leaving 13 Q sorts unclassified (12 of these were mixed loaders; 1 sort did not load significantly on any of the factors). Factors 1 and 2 are orthogonal (uncorrelated). In contrast, Factor 3 is moderately correlated with the other 2 factors, indicating that the viewpoint of Factor 3 definers bears some similarity to those of the definers in Factors 1 and 2. Nevertheless, this third group represents a distinct point of view.

Correlation among factors

Factor	1	2	3
1	1.00	—	—
2	0.17	1.00	—
3	0.49**	0.49**	1.00

** $p < 0.01$, $r^2 = 24\%$

Factor 1: Focus on Merit/Qualifications in Hiring

Fifteen women and 28 men defined this factor. All but 5 of the participants indicated on the questionnaire that their attitude toward affirmative action programs was “not at all favorable” (17 men, 7 women) or “somewhat unfavorable” (8 men, 5 women). One man indicated that he was “indifferent;” 1 was “somewhat in favor” (2 women chose this option); and 1 was “very much in favor.” One woman did not respond to this item. Statements most

⁴ PQMethod, V. 2.09, developed by Peter Schmolck, is a freeware package, downloadable at the following web address: <http://www.rz.uni-bw-muenchen.de/~p41bsmk/qmethod/>.

⁵ According to Brown (1980), a loading is deemed to be significant at $p < 0.01$ if it exceeds 0.26 [i.e., $2.58(SE_i)$, where $(SE_i) = 1/\sqrt{N}$]. However, given the large sample size in this study and the concomitant reduction in SE, we decided to follow a more conservative approach and consider a loading significant if it exceeded 0.38 [i.e., $3.70 (SE_i)$, $p < 0.0001$].

characteristic of this group appear in the tables following. Asterisks indicate statements distinguishing this factor from the other factors.⁶

Factor 1: Statements most like my point of view

No.	Statement	Rank	Z-Score
62	The best qualified person should be hired.	+5	1.63
35	It should be equal opportunity for everyone — no preferential treatment of one group or another.	+5	1.59
65	A person should be qualified for a job. They shouldn't be given special treatment because they are a woman or a minority group member.	+4	1.57
64*	Hiring should be based on merit and should have nothing to do with race or sex.	+4	1.56
57**	People shouldn't be given jobs to fill quotas.	+4	1.50
49	People shouldn't be hired on the basis of their gender or their minority group status.	+4	1.48

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Factor 1: Statements most unlike my point of view

No.	Statement	Rank	Z-Score
30**	There should be some special treatment or women and minorities will never get jobs or promotions.	-4	-1.44
56**	I agree with these special programs for target groups.	-4	-1.50
22**	This is a good way to make sure everyone is treated equally.	-4	-1.63
9**	It will give everyone a fair chance.	-4	-1.68
20	Half of all work places should be composed of female employees and whatever percentage of the population that is minorities.	-5	-1.69
45	Women aren't as capable as men.	-5	-1.92

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

⁶ Distinguishing statements differentiate one factor from all others. The difference between factor scores is significant at $p < 0.01$ if it exceeds 2.58(Standard Error of the Difference), where SED is calculated by taking the square root of the sum of the standard errors of the factors involved (Brown 1980).

Members of this group strongly endorsed the notion that hiring should be based solely on merit and the qualifications of the candidate, rather than on the basis of membership in a targeted group (62, 65, 64, 49), or to satisfy quotas (57). At the same time, they strongly disagreed with the position that there should be special programs aimed at enhancing opportunities for disadvantaged groups (30,56), possibly because they saw these programs as unfair (9), and inappropriate for ensuring equal treatment (22). This group appeared to believe in the ideal of equality of opportunity (35), although the belief may be qualified by their strong objection to the idea of proportional representation of target groups in the work place (20). In fact, there is some suggestion of denial of the existence of inequality in the work place (30).

Factor 2: Recognition of Inequality and Need to Rectify Past Injustice

This factor was defined by 22 women and 6 men, whose responses to the attitude item on the questionnaire were predominantly positive (one person did not respond to this question). Specifically, 6 women indicated that they were “very much in favor” and 18 members of this group (13 women, 5 men) responded that they were “somewhat in favor” of affirmative action programs. Only 1 woman indicated that she was “indifferent” and 2 participants (1 woman, 1 man) reported “somewhat unfavorable” attitudes toward affirmative action programs. Statements most characteristic of this group appear in the tables following. Asterisks indicate statements distinguishing this factor from the other factors.

Factor 2: Statements most like my point of view

No.	Statement	Rank	Z-Score
41	It is good to provide a chance for equal access to all jobs, but they must be sufficiently qualified to do the job.	5	1.76
47*	Women are just as good as men.	5	1.75
40**	There should be preferential treatment, but the woman or minority should still have to have all the qualifications for the job.	4	1.64
34**	It gives women and minorities opportunities that they might not necessarily have.	4	1.47
19**	Women are under-represented in certain sectors.	4	1.35
4**	In the past, the designated groups have not been given the same opportunities as others. This systematic barrier must be overcome.	4	1.31

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

In contrast with those who loaded on Factor 1, members of the Factor 2 group recognized the existence of inequality and discrimination and the need to rectify past injustice (19, 4, 29). Indeed, equality appeared to be highly valued by these respondents (47, 16). Moreover, they acknowledged the need for affirmative action programs as a means to promote equality in the work place (41,34). Although this group agreed with the notion of preferential treatment programs, it was also clear that they strongly believed that candidates should have the necessary skills and qualifications (41, 40). As might be expected, members of this group strongly disagreed with both the common misconception that individuals hired under such policies are less competent (10), and also with the notion that men should be given preference over women in a time of job shortage (46).

Factor 2: Statements most unlike my point of view

No.	Statement	Rank	Z-Score
16	I'm more in favor of it for minorities than for women.	-4	-1.41
10**	Employees so hired are substandard.	-4	-1.42
51	I just don't like it.	-4	-1.47
29**	I don't believe there is that much discrimination.	-4	-1.54
46**	If not enough jobs for men and women both, men should be working instead of women.	-5	-2.06
45	Women aren't as capable as men.	-5	-2.13

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

Factor 3: Denial of Disadvantage

This factor was defined by 6 men and 7 women. Responses to the attitude measure were mixed, with slightly more than half the group (3 men, 4 women) indicating that they were “somewhat in favor” of affirmative action programs. Two respondents (1 woman, 1 man) indicated that they were “indifferent”; 2 participants (1 woman, 1 man) reported “somewhat unfavorable” attitudes toward affirmative action programs; and 2 (1 woman, 1 man) chose the “not at all favorable” option in response to the question. Statements most characteristic of this group appear in the tables following. Asterisks indicate statements distinguishing this factor from the other factors.

This group expressed opinions similar to those who defined Factor 1 in that they agreed strongly that hiring should be done on the basis of qualifications and merit, and should be unrelated to group membership (64, 62, 49, 41). They also disagreed with the notion that special treatment should be extended to

some groups (35, 16), and that work places should be representative of the population (20). Members of this group, like those in Factor 1, tended to deny the existence of discriminatory hiring practices (36). Finally, they strongly disagreed with statements that suggested these policies negatively affected white males (23, 24), and appeared to be unconcerned with the possibility of a backlash from men (52).

Factor 3: Statements most like my point of view

No.	Statement	Rank	Z-Score
64**	Hiring should be based on merit and should have nothing to do with race or sex.	5	1.91
62	The best qualified person should be hired.	5	1.72
36**	It's a free world and everyone is given the opportunity to get an education to help get a job.	4	1.60
49	People shouldn't be hired on the basis of their gender or their minority group status.	4	1.58
41	It is good to provide a chance for equal access to all jobs, but they must be sufficiently qualified to do the job.	4	1.53
35	It should be equal opportunity for everyone - no preferential treatment of one group or another.	4	1.41

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Factor 3: Statements most unlike my point of view

No.	Statement	Rank	Z-Score
20	Half of all work places should be composed of female employees and whatever percentage of the population is minorities.	-4	-1.70
52**	I'm afraid of the backlash from men.	-4	-1.75
16**	I'm more in favor of it for minorities than for women.	-4	-1.81
23**	It's getting white males ticked off.	-4	-1.89
24**	It takes away jobs from white males.	-5	-1.90
45	Women aren't as capable as men.	-5	-2.34

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Consensus Statements.

Four of the 70 statements did not distinguish among any of the factors. Three of these statements were deemed virtually irrelevant by the participants. All 3 groups endorsed the statement, "Employers shouldn't even consider race or sex when they are hiring."

Consensus Statements

No.	Statement	Factor Z-Scores		
		1	2	3
42	I agree with it in theory but not in practice.	-0.50	-0.74	-0.69
58	I agree that people in disadvantaged positions need an extra edge, but I still don't agree with quotas.	0.61	0.67	0.74
60	It provides stress in the workplace, as these people don't feel like they are getting jobs on merit.	0.38	0.15	0.32
50	Employers shouldn't even consider race or sex when they are hiring.	1.04	0.74	1.14

Follow-up Analyses

A chi-square test was conducted to determine whether there were gender differences in group membership. Results of this test were significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 84) = 12.99, p = 0.002$. Follow-up examination of the standardized residuals from this analysis indicated that the significant effect was due to the smaller than expected number of men defining Factor 2, $z = -2.00, p < 0.05$, 2-tailed. There were no other significant differences between observed and expected frequencies. A 3 (group) by 2 (gender) Analysis of Variance of scores on the attitude item included in the questionnaire yielded a main effect for group, $F_{(2,76)} = 200.94, p = 0.005$, but neither a main effect for gender, $F_{(1,76)} = 4.54, p = 0.094$, nor an interaction between group and gender, $F_{(2,76)} = 0.171, p = 0.843$. *Post hoc* means comparisons, using the Bonferroni procedure, indicated that attitude scores differed significantly between groups (2-tailed $p < 0.05$). Factor 1 definers ($M = 1.70$) expressed the most negative attitude, followed by Factor 3 definers ($M = 3.00$). Factor 2 expressed the most positive attitude ($M = 3.91$). To investigate the possibility of group and gender differences in age, education, and income, 3 two-way Analyses of Variance were conducted. The only significant effect was that of group differences in income, $F_{(2,75)} = 46.73, p = 0.007$. Follow-up comparisons, using the Bonferroni procedure revealed that those who endorsed Factor 1 reported significantly higher income than Factor 3 respondents.

Summary and Conclusions

Factor 1 reflects some of the most common objections to affirmative action programs (see, for example, Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, and Zanna, 1998). First, there is the belief that the qualifications of those hired under such programs are almost irrelevant — that they are hired almost exclusively on the basis of their group status, or to fill quotas. This is further supported by endorsement of such statements as “Unqualified people may get jobs” (+2); “Companies may not be getting the most qualified people” (+2); “It eliminates the better qualified candidates” (+2); and, “Preferential treatment brings quality down because unqualified workers may be hired due to the lowering of hiring standards” (+2). The second objection is related to the perceived unfairness of special treatment, a perception that appears to arise from the belief that current hiring practices are objective and blind to anything other than the qualifications and merit of the applicant. Finally, Factor 3 definers appear to subscribe to the notion that there is little or no discrimination in hiring — that there is equality of opportunity — and, therefore, no need for such programs. Support for this is evident in the sorters’ agreement with the statement “It eliminates the better qualified applicant” (+3).

The viewpoint represented by Factor 2 is more aligned with the intentions of affirmative action programs; i.e., recognition of past injustice, discrimination in hiring practices, and the need to equalize opportunities for members of targeted groups. Additional evidence for this comes from rankings placed on such statements as “Given normal circumstances, most of the minority groups don’t have access to jobs because of past treatment” (+3); “Some groups need this type of policy to enter into the work force initially” (+3); “Some groups aren’t well represented in the job market, and affirmative action makes up for this inequality” (+3); and, “People do not change quickly voluntarily, and they need the boost in order to change their attitudes” (+2).

One of the main themes underlying Factor 3 seems to be a denial of the existence of inequality of opportunity; e.g., “Women must catch up with the rest of the population” (-3) and “For years women haven’t had a fair chance. They now need preferential treatment to make up for this and balance things out” (-3). Accompanying this denial of disadvantage is the belief that everyone has the same opportunity to obtain an education and a job. Another striking feature of this factor is sorters’ negative endorsement of statements indicating that these policies affect white males and might provoke a backlash, suggesting an adverse reaction to the notion of white males as a privileged group. There is also a hint of discrimination in this factor, evidenced by endorsement of items such as “Companies may not be getting the most qualified people and consumers may suffer” (+3); and, “Minorities shouldn’t be able to take jobs away from Canadians” (+2).

The finding that some agree with affirmative action programs and some disagree is not surprising. More interesting are the differences in the 2 perspectives exemplified by Factors 1 and 3, both of which expressed anti-affirmative action sentiments. Factor 1 group members strongly favored hiring based on qualifications and merit alone, and disagreed with the idea that special treatment is needed to ensure fairness in hiring — one of the goals of affirmative action. In contrast, although the group representing Factor 3 also endorsed the importance of qualifications and merit in hiring, they expressed clear denial of inequality and strong disagreement with items representing some of the problems (e.g., negative reactions from white males) associated with affirmative action.

Results of the follow-up analyses suggest that differences among the three perspectives were unrelated to age or education. Those who reported the highest income and were in that respect, the most privileged, opposed affirmative action primarily on the basis of qualifications and merit, implying that the beneficiaries of such programs would be deficient in this respect.

Although there is certainly overlap in the attitudes depicted in these three factors, it is also clear that there are important differences — differences that are not obvious when attitudes are measured by scores on a composite scale. Most troubling is the pervasiveness of the beliefs that (1) qualifications and merit are not considered sufficiently in hiring under affirmative action programs, and (2) there is little or no discrimination in current hiring practices. Given the falsity of these beliefs and their consequences for disadvantaged groups, it is essential to take steps to disabuse people of these ideas.

These objections to affirmative action programs might be addressed directly by educating the public about the continued existence of discrimination, the harm that it brings to society, the need to ensure equality of opportunity, and the resulting benefits of affirmative action to society. An alternative to this approach is suggested by Stroud (1999), who argues that affirmative action programs might be more palatable if they were justified by “forward-looking” rather than “backward-looking” considerations. Rather than focusing on the use of affirmative action as a means to rectifying past injustice, she suggests that “... we see the aim of affirmative action as the elimination of unwarranted attitudes that impede rational deliberation about career choices and aspirations and thereby keep people from achieving their full potential.” (p. 386). In the end, this is the primary goal of affirmative action programs: ensuring that individuals have the freedom to choose a career that is consistent with their abilities, skills, and interests, unimpeded by the notion that some options are not open to them because of their membership in a particular group. The key to achieving this goal is changing attitudes.

The results of this study help to highlight the usefulness of Q methodology with respect to understanding attitudes. This is illustrated using the results of the analysis of the single-item attitude measure. The average attitude score for Factor 1 was clearly negative and consistent with the perspective represented by the corresponding Q sort. Similarly, for Factor 2, the Q sort results and the attitude measure were congruent (i.e., both positive/supportive of affirmative action). In contrast, there was a substantial discrepancy between the average attitude score and the Factor 3 perspective. On average, this group was “indifferent” as indicated by their scores on the attitude item included in the questionnaire, but presented a factor viewpoint that was far from indifferent.

The results of this study also suggest that opposition to affirmative action programs is based primarily on backward-looking misunderstanding and misinterpretation of these policies, and provide some basis on which to work to change these misconceptions.

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Appendix

Q Statements

No.	Statement
1	For years women haven't had a fair chance. They now need preferential treatment to make up for this and balance things out.
2	The history of injustices that women and minorities experienced should be rectified.
3	Given normal circumstances, most of the minority groups don't have access to jobs because of past treatment.
4	In the past the designated groups have not been given the same opportunities as others. This systematic barrier must be overcome.
5	Past injustices can be rectified in other ways.
6	I don't think anyone should get special treatment. What's in the past is in the past.
7	As a member of a targeted group, these programs might benefit me.
8	Not being a member of a targeted group, these programs might affect me negatively.
9	It will give everyone a fair chance.
10	Employees so hired are substandard.
11	It eliminates the better qualified candidates.
12	Preferential treatment brings quality down because unqualified workers may be hired due to the lowering of hiring standards.
13	Unqualified people may get jobs.
14	Companies may not be getting the best qualified people and consumers may suffer.
15	I'm more in favour of it for women than for minorities.
16	I'm more in favour of it for minorities than for women.
17	Some groups aren't well represented in the job market and Affirmative Action makes up for this inequality.
18	The percentage of minorities in the real world is lower than what they want to see in the work force.
19	Women are under-represented in certain sectors.
20	Half of all work places should be composed of female employees and whatever percentage of the population that is minorities.
21	No one should receive special treatment. Everyone should be treated equally.
22	This is a good way to make sure everyone is treated equally.
23	It's getting white males ticked off.
24	It takes away jobs from white males.
25	It's reverse discrimination.
26	There is no other way to get a job unless you have some sort of affirmative action status.
27	It's institutionalized racism.

No.	Statement
28	Discrimination is still a big part of society and this is a good way to lessen it or get rid of it.
29	I don't believe there is that much discrimination.
30	There should be some special treatment or women and minorities will never get jobs or promotions.
31	Minorities must catch up with the rest of the population.
32	Women must catch up with the rest of the population.
33	Some groups need this type of policy to enter into the work force initially.
34	It gives women and minorities opportunities that they might not necessarily have.
35	It should be equal opportunity for everyone — no preferential treatment of one group or another.
36	It's a free world and everyone is given the opportunity to get an education to help get a job.
37	People do not change quickly voluntarily and they need the boost in order to change their attitudes.
38	Women and minorities are complaining that they're not getting what they want, but they don't deserve to have things handed to them.
39	If the government stops making the effort to help them, they won't even make an attempt to try to help themselves.
40	There should be preferential treatment, but the woman or minority should still have to have all the qualifications for the job.
41	It is good to provide a chance for equal access to all jobs, but they must be sufficiently qualified to do the job.
42	I agree with it in theory but not in practice.
43	I think the whole thing is a good idea, but it just isn't implemented well.
44	Some jobs can only be done by men.
45	Women aren't as capable as men.
46	If not enough jobs for men and women both, men should be working instead of women.
47	Women are just as good as men.
48	Women sometimes do the better job and it's about time people realized this.
49	People shouldn't be hired on the basis of their gender or their minority group status.
50	Employers shouldn't even consider race or sex when they are hiring.
51	I just don't like it.
52	I'm afraid of the backlash from men.
53	This is an unfair practice.
54	I believe women and minorities need equality but some of it (preferential treatment) seems unfair.

<i>No.</i>	<i>Statement</i>
55	Talent is being wasted by keeping a whole group of the community out of the work force, so this Affirmative Action is a good thing.
56	I agree with these special programs for target groups.
57	People shouldn't be given jobs just to fill quotas.
58	I agree that people in disadvantaged positions need an extra edge, but I still don't agree with quotas.
59	It's humiliating for a person to be hired based on their sex or race.
60	It provides stress in the workplace, as these people don't feel like they are getting jobs on merit.
61	I wouldn't want to be a token woman or minority.
62	The best qualified person should be hired.
63	Hiring decisions should be based on qualifications only.
64	Hiring should be based on merit and should have nothing do with race or sex.
65	A person should be qualified for a job. They shouldn't be given special treatment because they are a woman or a minority.
66	It's better for the employer to have the better qualified person - minorities may be less capable.
67	Minorities shouldn't be able to take jobs away from Canadians.
68	It's a total waste of government money.
69	I don't like it because I personally know people who will be hurt by it.
70	I like it because I personally know people who will benefit from it.