BLACK MIDDLE MANAGERS' EXPERIENCE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN A MEDIA COMPANY

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ABSTRACT

Affirmative action remains one of the most highly sensitive, emotive and hotly debated subjects in South Africa. It is nevertheless an important legislated strategy that needs to be thoroughly researched and constructively debated to bring change to the lives of previously disadvantaged individuals. The present study describes how five black middle managers experience affirmative action at a media company. Emphasis was placed on how these managers define affirmative action, whether they feel that others question their abilities because of this policy, and the extent to which affirmative action affects their job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. Results of the study revealed that participants experienced affirmative action positively as a mechanism that provides employment opportunities, but encounter many challenges and obstacles. These problems can be addressed by sustained commitment from organisations to make the function of the affirmative action policy explicit and to create a shared culture in the workplace.

OPSOMMING

Regstellende aksie is tans 'n sensitiewe saak wat vurige debat en emosies in Suid Afrika uitlok. Dit is egter 'n belangrike wetlike strategie wat deeglik nagevors en konstruktief gedebatteer moet word om verandering in die lewens van vorige benadeeldes te bring. Die huidige studie beskryf hoe vyf middelvlak bestuurders regstellende aksie by 'n mediamaatskappy beleef het. Klem word geplaas op hoe hierdie bestuurders regstellende aksie definieer, of hulle voel dat ander hul vaardighede betwyfel as gevolg van hierdie beleid, en die mate waartoe regstellende aksie hul werksbevrediging en verbintenis tot die organisasie beïnvloed. Resultate wys dat die deelnemers regstellende aksie positief beleef het as 'n meganisme wat werksgeleenthede skep maar data heelwat uitdagings en struikelblokke beleef word. Hierdie probleme kan aangespreek word deur volgehoue verbintenis van organisasies om die regstellende aksie beleid meer eksplisiet te maak en 'n gedeelde kultuur in die werkplek te skep.

In South Africa affirmative action has been legislated in an attempt to correct the imbalances of the past. According to Tinarelli (2000), the South African Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998) views affirmative action as a transitory intervention strategy designed to achieve equal employment opportunity without unduly restraining the career aspirations or expectations of current organisational members who are experienced in their jobs. *The Black Leader* provides a more business-focused definition of affirmative action as "a broad policy of making a concerted effort to employ black people in business, and to advance blacks into senior positions with real powers to make decisions" (Affirmative action: A company perspective, 1994, p. 17).

Affirmative action is therefore conceived as a deliberate and concerted effort to accelerate opportunities for previously disadvantaged communities through training and education relevant to business. The aim is to enable these communities to advance to positions in which they were previously not represented. This outcome is emphasised by Combs and Gruhl (1986), who maintain that affirmative action is not an end, but rather a means of ensuring the ultimate goal of equality of employment opportunity to remedy past and present discrimination against blacks, other minorities and women.

The success of affirmative action initiatives is equivocal. Some authors (e.g., Skedsvold & Mann, 1996) maintain that affirmative action policies may contribute to beneficiaries' job satisfaction and organisational commitment as they are offered employment and opportunities for advancement that may increase self-esteem. Other authors report that some beneficiaries experience high levels of stress and demotivation (Gillis, Gomes, Valliere & Doyon, 2001; Koekemoer, 1998). Although it is generally believed to entail positive, remedial action to redress historical injustices, affirmative action has also been associated with negative actions such as tokenism and reverse discrimination (Leopeng, 1999).

Adams (1993) asserts, however, that some programmes may fail as organisations maintain previous structures, cultural systems and management styles. New employees are expected to adapt and assimilate, and if they fail, they conform to the stereotype that they cannot succeed in the corporate environment. Companies may focus on helping black employees to overcome their perceived deficiencies through education, training and evaluation (Adams, 1993) whereas the problem may lie with historical systems that do not offer an environment conducive to new recruits (Thomas, 1996). Consequently, recruits feel excluded, become disillusioned and eventually leave. Furthermore, senior colleagues may perceive affirmative action appointees as less capable than their counterparts (De Witt, Erasmus & Swanepoel, 1998).

Although perceptions of affirmative action have been widely discussed in South Africa, very little information is available about the experiences of those that it affects, particularly middle managers. Previous research studies (e.g., Koekemoer, 1998) have focused mainly on arguments for and against affirmative action in South Africa. In its annual Black Emerging Market Perceptions (BEMP) study, a marketing research company, Mictert (2004), found that upwardly mobile black South African professionals are somewhat cautious about the impact of affirmative action in the workplace. Almost 54% of the 100 participants referred to affirmative action as window dressing, two out of five felt that black people are appointed as managers (without having the necessary skills) to make up quotas, and "over 72% feel that black people in industry are constantly underestimated in terms of what they are able to contribute" (http://www.mictert.co.za/bemp.html).

It can be contended that an exploration of the experiences of black managers in South Africa is still lacking in the literature although insight into what these individuals undergo is of

fundamental importance to understanding the impact of affirmative action policies. The aim of this study is to explore black middle managers' experiences of affirmative action at a media company. To achieve this aim the following aspects are explored: how black middle managers define affirmative action, whether they feel that their self-esteem is undermined by affirmative action, whether they feel that others question their abilities because of affirmative action, whether they experience the company's culture as accommodating or not, and the extent to which the affirmative action policies affect their job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
Due to the paucity of literature on experiences of affirmative action by black middle managers this study was an exploratory endeavour aimed at providing a description of the phenomenon by giving a neutral, close and thorough account of the topic (Polkinghorne, 1989). A qualitative approach was used as it affords the researcher the opportunity to describe an experience from the participants' point of view and to record their impressions (including words, gestures and tone). This sentiment is echoed in Polkinghorne's (1989) assertion that "from the qualitative perspective, the richness and profundity of human reality is seen as closely related to the structures and meanings of natural language" (p. 45). This approach also enables the researcher to obtain detailed information in order to share in the understanding and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives (Berg, 1998). Furthermore, through this approach the researcher can focus on the subjective meanings, definitions, metaphors, symbols and descriptions as presented by participants.

Within the qualitative tradition, a phenomenological research method was chosen for this study. Phenomenology regards the context in which human experience occurs as important (Kruger, 1988). Human experience and behaviour are always linked to the living world of the individual and every human experience is linked to the situation in which the person lives. Thus "the commitment to understanding human phenomena in context, as they are lived, using context-derived terms and categories, is often referred to as the phenomenological perspective" (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999, p. 126). Phenomenology does not view individuals as organisms that react to stimuli, but as organisms that perceive or experience reality in unique ways. It also accepts that every human being experiences his or her living world in a unique and non-repeatable way and that he or she is also affected in a unique way by the phenomenon. To this effect, the phenomenological method was seen as being appropriate and best suited to gather an authentic understanding of black middle managers' experiences. This article aims to describe the phenomenon as it is experienced by the individual in his or her lived world, namely how black middle managers in a media company experience affirmative action.

A person known to the authors who used to work at the media company under investigation introduced the researcher (first author) to the Human Resources Manager who was very helpful in providing a list of black middle managers with their contact details and departments. Potential research participants were contacted via the telephone after which e-mails were sent explaining the study's aims and objectives. Some individuals replied via e-mail to indicate their willingness or unwillingness to participate, others requested a face-to-face meeting before deciding whether or not to participate. Appointments were made with consenting participants for a semi-structured face-to-face interview.

Tuttery, Rotnery and Grinnell (1996) recommend that a semi-structured interview be used when the researcher wants to understand people's experiences, and they posit that "it is important when you want to compare information between and among people while at the same time you wish to fully understand each person's experience" (p. 56). According to Polkinghorne (1989), the phenomenological interview is seen as a discourse or conversation involving an interpersonal engagement in which subjects share their experience with the researcher.

The in-depth interview included a number of pre-determined questions or key words used as a guide. It lasted from half an hour to an hour depending on the need to explore the participant's experience more fully. Interviews were conducted at the media company in the offices of each of the participants as they had the facilities to accommodate the interviewer and his equipment. These words of advice from Kruger (1988) were followed:

> Rapport should exist between the researcher and the subjects, and it is important that the researcher creates a situation in which the subject can feel relaxed and where anonymity and confidentiality can be guaranteed if so desired by the subject." (p. 151)

As a research principle, and given the sensitivity of the topic, participants were assured of confidentiality prior to the interview, with the affirmation that information shared was to be used solely for the purpose of the study. The researcher requested participants' permission to use a tape recorder to record the interview, and asked them to sign informed consent forms to demonstrate their understanding of the ethical issues involved in the research.

Participants
The media company used in the study was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the company has an established track record of implementing affirmative action, but was entering an interesting phase in which a number of high profile affirmative action employees had resigned. This captured the researchers' attention as a likely place to explore the phenomenon of affirmative action. Secondly, the company has substantial human resources. It was thus envisioned that proportionately more people would respond to the request to participate in the study than in smaller companies. Thirdly, the profile of the company as 'the voice of the people' presented an opportunity to investigate whether sensitive and hotly debated issues like affirmative action were taken seriously by an organisation that professes to be representative of all South Africans. Lastly, a previously established relationship with a manager at the company provided a contact person (or gatekeeper) who laid the foundation for entering the organisation and introduced the study to potential participants.

Middle managers were targeted due to their position as the bridge between top management and the employees that they in turn deal with. An understanding of their conceptualisations and experiences are crucial for the success of employment equity in the company as they affect the managers' own performance, the performance of the employees they manage and therefore the functioning of the company as a whole. Participants were chosen deliberately by virtue of the fact that they come from a previously disadvantaged group (black Africans) and were appointed by the company during the implementation of its present affirmative action policy. This sampling method is known as purposive or judgemental sampling (Neuman, 2000).

The sample consisted of four black middle managers, two male and two female. Three worked in the Human Resources Department and one in the IT Department. The participants had

spent an average of four years in the organisation. The sample was limited to four so that rapport could be established and in-depth data gathered with each of the participants. As this study is exploratory, data collection ended when sufficient material had been gathered to be able to construct initial descriptions of the phenomenon.

The manager of the Human Resources Department was interviewed as a fifth participant. This was done primarily to gain an understanding of the media company's affirmative action history and to grasp the context in which the managers operate. Valuable information as to the mood and culture of the company was gleaned from this interview.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed verbatim for purposes of analysis. Polkinghorne asserts that "the aim of phenomenological inquiry is to reveal and unravel the structures, logic, and interrelationships obtained in the phenomenon under inspection" (p. 50). Data analysis is at the core of this aim as it enables the researcher to derive a description of the essential features of a specific experience. In pursuit of this goal, data were analysed using the Interpretative-Transformational Approach (Ashworth, Giorgi & de Koning, 1986). This approach involves reducing the data through their transformation into psychological language and represents a step-wise procedure intended for a total account of the data.

The researcher used the following four steps as proposed by Giorgi (1985):

1. Sense of whole: This entails reading the naïve descriptions several times in order to get a general sense of the whole.
2. Discrimination of meaning units: After the sense of whole had been grasped, the text was broken down into manageable units focusing on the phenomenon studied (i.e. affirmative action). The delineated meaning units are used to ultimately lead to the discovery of the essence or structure of the conceptualisations and experiences of affirmative action by black middle managers.
3. Transformation of meaning units into psychological language: This was arrived at when the meaning units were delineated, examined and expressed in terms of the psychological insight contained in them.
4. Synthesis of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of affirmative action: This entailed synthesising and integrating the insights contained in the transformed meaning units into a consistent description of the psychological structure of the event.

To understand the experiences of participants, the researcher reread the protocol and transcripts and listened to the recorded interviews repeatedly to gain a holistic sense of the whole of the data. A more exacting analysis was followed by spontaneously breaking down the data into natural meaning units (themes). Themes were initially expressed in the everyday language of the participants themselves and later transformed into formal psychological language.

To ensure rigour in this study, Guba's and Lincoln's (1981) four aspects of trustworthiness and the corresponding strategies applied by Krefting (1990) were used. The first aspect, truth-value, asks whether the researcher has established confidence in the truth of finding the subjects and the context in which the study was undertaken. To this end credibility strategies are used. Credibility refers to the ability of participants to recognise their experience in the research findings. The second aspect, applicability, refers to the degree to which the findings can be applied to other context and settings or with other groups. In this study, the researchers are of the view that applicability is not relevant as the study aims to describe particular experiences within a specific media company

without trying to generalise to other situations or contexts. Consistency is the third aspect and speculates whether the findings would be consistent if the inquiry were replicated with the same subjects or in a similar context. The key in this research was to learn from the informants rather than to control the conditions of the research situation. To achieve consistency, dependability strategies were employed. Dependability implies that a clear explanation of the data gathering and analysing procedures have been provided such that an independent researcher would be able to determine the extent to which the study is unique or repeatable (Krefting, 1990). The last aspect, neutrality, refers to the degree to which findings are a function solely of the informants and conditions of the research and not of other biases, motivations, and perspectives (Krefting, 1990). To achieve neutrality, confirmability strategies were used. Confirmability is viewed as the ability of an outsider to authenticate how and why decisions were made, and thus authenticate the research method, findings and results.

RESULTS

Five themes that describe the essence of the participants' experience of affirmative action in their lived-world context are presented in this section. Direct quotes from participants are written in italics.

The Meaning of Affirmative Action

The participants regard affirmative action as a mechanism that should give preference to blacks, the disabled and women in areas such as job hiring, admission to institutions of higher education, the awarding of government contracts, and other allocations of social benefits. They also emphasised that policy should be in place to make a concerted effort to employ black people into senior positions with real powers to make decisions. One of the participants expressed this as follows: "*It is a measure used to ensure that previously disadvantaged groups are given equal opportunity and are equitably represented in the workplace. Not as clerks and secretaries but in decision-making positions*". This implies that potential and competence should underpin affirmative action where incumbents carry the responsibility to achieve the outcomes they are expected to. They are thus held equally responsible for the performance of the company.

Thus participants presented a positive view of affirmative action and see it as a form of redress: "*As a deliberate process by which certain groups and people are consciously given preference and opportunity over others in order to level the playing field and correct past imbalances in opportunity and benefit*". They all support the view that affirmative action entails essentially positive, remedial action taken to redress historical injustices. This supports Leopeng's (1999) findings about the positive impact of affirmative action as a necessary correction for past inequalities.

Hierarchical Stereotypes

Participants consistently discussed their experience of stereotypes that are based on gender and race. Women are especially regarded as incompetent and lacking the necessary skills: "*I think it could happen to any black person, but it happens much more aggressively if you're a woman*". More pronounced is the reluctance by some black men to be lead by a woman: "*I feel black male Africans, they don't want to be managed by women*". Even female subordinates find it difficult to be lead by another woman. According to the participants, when leadership positions occur along interracial lines black women experience negative stereotypes even more strongly: "*And I think in race groups, our sisters who are Coloureds and Indians you will still find those that perceive ... themselves as being superior*

to blacks". Perhaps due to affirmative action being born of a need to reverse Apartheid's system of racial categorisation and subsequent differential treatment of race groups, a discourse of purported hierarchy of race (and gender and race) still permeates the organisational culture.

Stereotyping is also accompanied by stigmatisation of affirmative action employees. Participants feel that some people within the company still believe that being affirmed means that employees are not appointed based on their abilities and skills. This finding supports Gillis et al.'s (2001) assertion that the affirmed are seen to have acquired their positions because of their race instead of ability and efforts. Consequently, incumbents have to work harder than their white counterparts.

Addressing Fear and Resistance

Participants contend that they encountered strong resistance during the initial stages of employment. As one interviewee put it, "*I actually think one of the problems why affirmative action has not achieved what it is intended to achieve and as rapidly as possible as it should, it is precisely because of white fears and the truth of the matter is affirmative action programmes have done very little to allay those fears*". This correlates with Anstey's (1997) argument that affirmative action violates white employees' sense of security, threatens positions, jobs, incomes, self-esteem and feelings of worth. Some employees may thus exhibit extremely negative views about the implementation of affirmative action (Leopeng, 1999), and consequently resist it (Koekemoer, 1998).

One sign of resistance, according to interviewees, is the formation of so-called 'power blocks'. According to one of the participants, this is when "*white managers, especially middle management form a powerful block and really define culture and climate of organisation, i.e. critical mass force and practice*". The importance of the organisation's culture is underpinned by Anstey's (1997) argument that organisational culture change should precede organisational re-engineering initiatives in order to reduce fear and resistance and promote ownership of and active participation in the affirmative action process. The power block also has the ability to make conditions unbearable for black appointees, causing many of them to leave the company soon after they have joined. Two specific problems mentioned by participants are that of slowing the transformation process and lacking the commitment to implement changes.

Expectations of Affirmative Action

An expectation held by the black managers who participated in this study is that affirmative action will lead to the empowerment of the designated group. Participants entered the company with high expectations and the desire to develop, achieve success and add value to bottom line delivery. Thus, affirmative action is viewed and experienced positively as a reparation exercise that afords the affirmed empowerment, as expressed by a participant: "*By empowering people, by giving people ... special treatment though legislation. To try and say to people, look, we have been discriminated against in the past and this is what we are doing to correct that. We are also going to give you special treatment. I see that as reparation*".

However, participants believed that some unrealistic expectations and a sense of false entitlement are evident among some black employees. They felt that some of their subordinates do not understand the job performance obligations and think that they are entitled to the benefits afforded by affirmative action, irrespective of their input. These subordinates think more about rewards than responsibilities and bottom-line delivery and, according to one participant, endorse the idea that: "*And because I am black I should be given the opportunity to advance even though I am clearly not demonstrating competence. Nor am I*

demonstrating an attitude to show that I want to learn and I want to improve". If the incumbent does not understand his or her role in the transforming organisational culture, then expectations of advancement based on entitlement may be an unintended consequence of implementing affirmative action (Madi, 1993).

In trying to facilitate and implement affirmative action, interviewees felt that the company was caught on the horns of a dilemma due to opposing expectations. Contrary to the expectations of some black candidates, shareholders expect bottom line delivery to take precedence over affirmative action. Middle managers in particular are at the centre of the affirmative action plan. They have to ensure a balance between facilitating affirmative action and bringing in revenue. They experience this tension as challenging and demanding: "*At the same time, your shareholder expects you to be profitable, even if you are not profitable. They suddenly expect you to make profit and not cost them money. Now that draws tensions and those are major pressures that you have to try and balance out*".

As if this is not enough, the pressure of affirmative action is further accentuated by having to meet public expectations: "*... and here you are as an executive manager, you are required to ... achieve a public mandate, servicing the public on a number of areas.*" Added to the shareholder demand and expectations of sustaining company revenue, organisational support to help black middle managers succeed was perceived as lacking. For example, the interviewees noted that they have had to deal with negative attitudes from other managers who did not expect them to succeed and that this affects their morale.

Confidence and Competency

Although the previous themes highlight some negative experiences, the overall feeling of participants is a positive one, underpinned by a profound sense of achievement. Participants contradicted Gillis et al.'s (2001) assertion that affirmative action tends to undermine the self-esteem of the incumbents. Rather, the findings concur with Graves and Powell's (1994) findings that affirmative action policies increase job satisfaction and organisational commitment among beneficiaries: "*I think the way that we've gone about it is to demonstrate our competence. We can do the job and that we want to be held accountable where we fail*".

Participants regard being affirmed as constituting an acknowledgement of inner ability by significant others. The present findings support Skedsvold and Mann's (1996) claim that affirmative action may actually raise the self-esteem of the affirmed by providing them with employment and opportunities for advancement. The following statement sums up this sense of accomplishment: "*To be given an opportunity on an equal footing with other people to prove one's worth. To be able to change perceptions about blacks (specifically black women) in the workplace*". The environment in which the affirmed works can either retard or nourish this sense of achievement.

Nonetheless, participants felt that they have to work harder than their white counterparts to prove themselves. Their success or failure is measured in terms of the potential to learn and the job competency they possess. Participants felt that if they possess these two qualities, their work experience can be enjoyable. Though affirmative action is a platform to showcase these two aspects to the self and to the world, one's resilience and ability to cope is also very critical: "*The only way you wade through the white block and resistance is through confidence*". Confidence enables affirmed employees to overcome barriers. From the results of this study, it can be deduced that people who believe that skills, hard work, foresight and responsible behaviour lead to positive outcomes will cope better when affirmed. In this study, participants believed in their ability

and competence, and acted to counter any hostility directed at them: "*Now if you are a manager faced with a white middle management block, unless you are very strong, assertive and have support from the top as well as from the bottom, you are not going to survive that war*".

Participants were pleased with the progress and direction taken by the media company in implementing affirmative action. They felt that generally people are appointed mainly on merit: "*I would commend [the company] on that affirmative action was not just window dressing or increasing the numbers, they really did train the people. They really went out to hunt and got the right people for the job*". Thus, competency and potential are not compromised in the application of affirmative action, and standards are perceived to remain high (Leopeng, 1999).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The way in which middle managers conceptualise and experience affirmative action at the media company under study should be understood in context. Due to the unique position that middle managers occupy, they may experience affirmative action differently to other employees. In this study participants view affirmative action positively; it is a corrective measure aimed at levelling the playing field. According to participants' definitions, affirmative action is an experience that includes aspects of opportunity, expectations, endurance, learning and fulfilment. However, it is also riddled with barriers and challenges that need to be overcome in the pursuit of fulfilment.

The present study suggests that the affirmative action process implemented at the media company offers people an opportunity for self-actualisation. The meaning that affirmative action has for participants is that of a process that presents a chance to express the capabilities, potentialities, or talents that they have. A positive experience of affirmative action warrants an environment that accommodates, nurtures, and supports the uniqueness of each employee. However, in striving for what makes life ideal or the ultimate sense of achievement, black middle managers have to face some stereotyping and resistance along the way. In general, despite these hurdles, the black middle managers' experience of affirmative action at the company seems to be positive.

Affirmative action implies change. The change occurs through the creation of a new context by both employees from previously disadvantaged and advantaged groups. The environment should allow for mutual influence, feedback and adaptation. As perceived by participants, affirmative action should not lead to the lowering of a company's standards. If not managed properly, however, people's perceptions of affirmative action may result in stereotyping, fear and resistance. This introduces a complex dimension of affirmative action as it has been implemented at the media company. The company may have assumed that its employees would understand why and how affirmative action was implemented as well as that it was implemented in good faith. There may be a discrepancy between the perception of affirmative action as a policy that addresses past injustices and people's perceptions of affirmative action that may be based on a lack of knowledge about the function of the company's policy. This discrepancy may be the cause of fear amongst previously advantaged employees. From the participants' responses it seems that little has been done to address these fears within the company.

Some recommendations for the future of affirmative action in the media company (that may be relevant to other corporates) can be made. Firstly, there is a need for management to understand employees' attitudes to human resource management in general and affirmative action in particular. Affirmative action is not a simplistic mechanism to redress past injustices. It is a policy that requires all role-players to understand not just the rationale for the policy, but also the organisational and interpersonal consequences of its implementation. Secondly, there should be a more concerted effort towards creating a shared culture. This relates to the lack of an attempt to examine the historical context that was created before the workforce was diversified. Thirdly, ownership of the change process can be promoted and buy-in achieved from all employees by giving them the opportunity to participate actively in the change process. Lastly, affirmative action should be coupled with increased intergroup contact and dialogue. Increased contact can lead to a growing recognition of similarities between groups and the generation of enhanced mutual respect.

The experience of affirmative action is a broad field of study and could not be dealt with thoroughly in this study. More studies should therefore be conducted on other previously disadvantaged groups' experience of affirmative action, for example, women and the disabled. Black women seem to be in an especially precarious position regarding their colleagues' perceptions of their competence in positions of leadership. To augment this study, the following questions may be worthwhile researching: how do different levels of employees experience affirmative action, and what is the relationship between employment equity and job satisfaction?

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