Affirmative Meritocracy

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Affirmative action is often framed as a choice between diversity and merit. But it's a false choice. Research shows that organizations can increase the diversity of selection decisions BY promoting merit.
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A false choice

Affirmative action is often framed as a trade-off. If organizations choose to admit or hire ethnic minority candidates with lower qualifications, they purchase diversity at the price of merit.

But this perceived trade-off rests on a faulty assumption—that school grades, test scores, and other measures of merit work the same way for all students. It turns out that's not true. In fact, measures of merit systematically underestimate the potential of members of minority groups.

Stereotype threat

Negative stereotypes about the intellectual abilities of minority groups act like a psychological headwind: They are threatening, distracting, and anxiety-provoking—and they prevent people in devalued groups from performing as well as they are capable.

Empirical research suggests that stereotype-related psychological threats explain half or more of the gender gap on the SAT math test and 20-40% of race differences on the SAT as a whole.

As a consequence, people targeted by negative stereotypes can perform much better in school or on the job than selection measures administered in typical settings would suggest.

Affirmative meritocracy

If measures of merit systematically underestimate the abilities of minority applicants, then by accounting for this bias, schools and employers can make selection decisions that are simultaneously based on merit *and* promote diversity.

Policy Recommendations

1. *Organizations should reduce the level of psychological threat in their own environments.* Psychological threats can creep into even well-intentioned school and work settings. Just knowing that a test is intended to evaluate math ability can make women worry that if they score poorly, people might think that women really can't do math—and that worry can harm their scores. Preventing or mitigating this worry helps students who face negative stereotypes perform better.

How can you create a stereotype-safe environment? There are many ways. You can:

    a. Reduce overt and covert prejudice in school and work settings.
    b. Create a critical mass by increasing the representation of minority group members, especially in positions of leadership and authority.
    c. Challenge maladaptive assumptions students may have about tests - like that they automatically yield group differences.
    d. Make every student feel that he or she is seen and valued as an individual, not as a token member of a group, such as by asking students to discuss their personally important values ("value-affirmations").
    e. Help students manage stress and anxiety – for example, help them see that stress and anxiety can help them perform well rather than hindering them.
    f. Address worries that students have about their social belonging in school.
    g. Encourage students to see critical academic feedback as providing an opportunity to learn and grow, not evidence that a teacher is biased.

2. Organizations may find that selection measures they use to make admissions or hiring decisions are biased against devalued groups—that they underestimate their potential. The best way to address this bias is to reduce stereotype threat in the environment in which the selection measure was assessed. But if that isn't possible, the organization may turn to one of several alternative remedies. It may:

    a. Disregard or replace measures assessed in biased environments.
    b. Correct for observed biases.
    c. Educate selection officers of the bias and allow them to weigh this information in evaluating individual applicants.

Conclusion

When measures of merit underestimate the abilities of stereotyped groups, blindly relying on such measures perpetuates discrimination against vulnerable people. By remedying this bias, organizations can increase the diversity of selection decisions *by* promoting merit.

Read the full article here: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/sipr.2013.7.issue-1/issuetoc

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