

Why Didn't I Get The Job? White Nonbeneficiaries' Reactions To Affirmative Action And Diversity Programs

W. Lee Grubb III, East Carolina University, USA
Amy McMillan-Capehart, East Carolina University, USA
William C. McDowell, East Carolina University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate how justifications for hiring procedures and hiring decisions impact white nonbeneficiaries' perceptions of fairness. The results for the procedural and distributive justice hypotheses were strikingly similar. Both the diversity justification and no justification were perceived to be fairer than the affirmative action justification for both procedural and distributive justice. Interestingly, however, the respondents perceived no justification to be fairer than the diversity justification. Of the three different scenarios, no justification was perceived to be the most fair and affirmative action was perceived to be the least fair justification.

Keywords: Affirmative action, diversity program, hiring decision

INTRODUCTION

Despite almost 40 years of effort, researchers and practitioners do not seem any closer to improving attitudes toward affirmative action programs or diversity initiatives. Results of many studies indicate that both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries hold negative attitudes toward affirmative action programs and diversity initiatives (Dovidio, & Gaertner, 1999; Elkins, Bozeman, & Phillips, 2003; Heilman & Blader, 2000; Nacoste, 1989; Richard, Fubara, & Castillo, 2000; Singer, 1993; Tougas & Veilleux, 1988; 1989; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). Causes of these negative attitudes range from racism to structural elements of the programs (Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, & Lev-Arey, 2006).

One of the most important organizational processes impacted by these programs involves hiring. Many organizations implement hiring policies and procedures related to both affirmative action programs and diversity management. Nonbeneficiaries, those individuals who are not offered employment from the organization, report negative attitudes toward these programs. In addition, lower levels of perceived fairness have been reported related to affirmative action and diversity programs (Kidder, et al., 2004; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Kravitz, 1995). Research has found that women and racioethnic minorities have expressed higher levels of support for affirmative action than white men (Snyder, Cleveland, & Thornton, 2006), whereas white males have expressed negative attitudes toward affirmative action because of their concern for future opportunities (Bobo & Kluegel, 1993). In particular, research has indicated that white men often state reverse discrimination as the number one reason for lack of support of affirmative action programs (Kidder et al., 2004).

Interestingly, affirmative action and diversity programs have been found to cause negative feelings with both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries alike (Elkins, Phillips, & Bozeman, 1999; Heilman & Blader, 2000; Richard, Fubara, & Castillo, 2000; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). In particular, one study found that men often assume females benefit from affirmative action as job candidates when no information regarding the organization's hiring policy was provided (Heilman & Blader, 2000). In addition, Heilman and Blader (2000) noted that women were

thought to be less competent than their counterparts when coworkers believed that affirmative action resulted in these women being hired. As such, these programs are often met with strong resistance.

While past research has investigated African-American and Hispanic beneficiaries' reactions to such programs using organizational justice to measure perceptions of distributive and procedural justice (McMillan-Capehart, Grubb, Philbrick, & Galy, 2008; Richard & Kirby, 1997), the purpose of the current study is to investigate how affirmative action and diversity program justifications for hiring procedures and hiring decisions impact fairness perceptions of white nonbeneficiaries. In doing so we address the call for research related to reactions to these programs. As such, this study makes an important contribution to the existing management literature. We provide insight for organizations making hiring decisions based on affirmative action programs or diversity initiatives. In particular, we draw upon equity theory and organizational justice theory to explain nonbeneficiaries' reactions to hiring decisions.

Using a scenario study design, the current study examined differences between respondents' reactions to different justifications for a hiring decision. We argue that perceptions of fairness related to hiring procedures and decisions will change depending on the justification used. In particular, this study examined white nonbeneficiaries' perceptions of justice based on three justifications for the hiring process and the hiring decision which include an affirmative action justification, a value in diversity justification, and no justification.

We first discuss the differences between these programs and define organizational justice. We then build a theoretical framework for the respondents' perceptions based on equity theory and organizational justice theory. Finally, we hypothesize that perceptions of justice will be higher for the value in diversity justification than for the affirmative action justification. We also hypothesize that whites will perceive the affirmative action justification to be less fair than when no justification is provided. Before proceeding, however, it is important to illustrate the differences between affirmative action programs and diversity initiatives.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION PROGRAMS AND DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

The terms affirmative action programs and diversity initiatives are often used interchangeably. There are, however, notable differences. For example, affirmative action programs are legally mandated while diversity programs are voluntary. Affirmative action programs are created to rectify past social injustices whereas diversity programs are more focused on awareness, education, and positive recognition of the differences among people in the workforce (Clemmons, 2004). As such, diversity management focuses on business needs instead of federal regulations (Gilbert, Stead, & Ivancevich, 1999). We define each term in the following paragraphs.

Affirmative action was created to reduce the adverse effects of past and present discriminatory practices in the hiring practices of organizations. In particular, the goal of affirmative action is to increase the numbers of underrepresented groups in an organization. Affirmative action requires U.S. federal contractors to take steps to improve the employment opportunities of different demographic groups. Federal civil service, the U.S. military, and many state and local governments require affirmative action programs as well. However, since its implementation more than twenty years ago, many misconceptions still exist. For example, contrary to popular belief, affirmative action plans do not involve strict quotas or the hiring of unqualified individuals. Despite the overall intentions of affirmative action programs, research suggests that they are often perceived to be unfair and are frequently met with negative reactions (Kravitz & Platania, 1993).

Diversity programs have become increasingly popular in order to make up for the perceived failures of affirmative action. For example, it is estimated that organizations spend \$8 billion a year on diversity training alone (Hansen, 2003). In addition, many organizations are now presenting a value-in-diversity approach as part of their strategic plan. Diversity programs therefore have become a "strategic imperative that can improve workforce productivity and organizational effectiveness" (Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004: 80). Organizations that manage diversity through programs and initiatives may achieve advantages such as attracting and retaining the best human resources, marketing success, higher creativity and innovation, better problem solving, improved organizational flexibility, and lower costs associated with absenteeism and job satisfaction (Cox & Blake, 1991; Richard, Murthi, & Ismail, 2007).

EQUITY THEORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE

According to Walker, Field, Giles, Bernerth, & Farmer, (2007: 489) “research has concluded that employees make constant assessments of procedural and distributive justice in human resource processes, and these assessments have the potential to influence workplace attitudes.” In particular, we have increased our understanding of how individuals relate to, perceive, and react to the outcomes and procedures used in the employee selection process. Most models have included theories of organizational justice and attribution to explore and confirm beliefs regarding the importance of distributive and procedural justice and the effects they have on both selected and rejected applicants (Gilliand, 1993; Gilliland, 1994; Konovsky, 2000; Ployhart & Ryan, 1997; Ployhart & Ryan, 1998; Ployhart, Ryan & Bennett, 1999; Smither, Milsap, Stoffey, Reilly, & Pearlman, 1996). Similarly, another stream of research regarding organizational justice and hiring decisions considers the justification used for the hiring decision. Recent research regarding diversity and affirmative action has shown that justification may impact perceptions of fairness related to hiring procedures and hiring decisions (McMillan-Capehart & Richard, 2005; McMillan-Capehart, Grubb, Philbrick, & Galy, 2008; Singer & Singer, 1991). The basis for this fairness can be examined through the use of equity theory.

According to equity theory, individuals compare themselves, both their inputs and outcomes, to a referent, similar other when making perceptions about fairness (Adams, 1963, 1965). For example, applicants make assessments of their qualifications (inputs) for the job and the end result of being offered employment or not (outcomes) (Walker et al., 2007). If the applicant believes that he/she is qualified but will not be offered the job because of affirmative action then the applicant may perceive a lack of equity. Thus, the success or failure of affirmative action and diversity programs may be influenced by whether or not individuals perceive them to be fair. Prior research suggests that when organizations implement affirmative action plans, resentment is often created (Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002; Cropanzano, Slaughter, & Bachiochi, 2005; Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Leck, Saunders, & Charbonneau, 1996; Tsui et al., 1992). Applicants compare the individual receiving the benefit of the affirmative action plan with themselves, according to equity theory, and will perceive that the hiring justification is either fair and equitable, or unfair and inequitable (Adams, 1965). For situations in which the individual feels a sense of equity, no additional action on the part of the individual will be taken. If the individual senses inequity, however, the individual may hold negative feelings about the organization or the situation.

Because of the potential for resentment, organizational justice is a useful tool for examining the perceived fairness of hiring processes and decisions based on affirmative action and diversity programs (Bobocel, et al., 1998; Cropanzano, et al., 2005; Kirby & Richard, 1996; Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Leck, et al., 1996; Tsui et al., 1992). The two primary areas where inequity may be perceived by the participants in this study are distributive and procedural justice. Distributive justice refers to situational outcomes and perceptions of equity, the hiring decision in this study, whereas procedural justice refers to the actual rules or procedures used to determine the outcome.

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice refers to one's fairness perceptions regarding the distribution of outcomes (Greenberg, 1990). Studies pertaining to distributive justice are primarily concerned with the extent to which outcomes are perceived to be equitable. In a hiring situation, not being offered a job may result in perceptions of inequity and produce negative thoughts and feelings. Individuals that are more sensitive to discrimination, such as women and minorities, may perceive hiring decisions to be unfair if they are not hired (Bobocel, et al., 1998; Cropanzano, et al., 2005; Gilliland, 1993; Leck, et al., 1996). Similarly, when not offered the position, white applicants may well conclude that the hiring decision was unfair.

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the procedures or rules used to determine the distribution of outcomes (Folger & Konovsky, 1989). In particular, researchers are concerned with the fairness of procedures used when making decisions. According to Leventhal (1980), procedural justice is in part determined by one's belief that the decisions were made using procedures that were free from bias, made consistently and used accurate information. Research suggests that procedural justice influences individuals' perceptions of fairness

regarding hiring decisions (Richard & Kirby, 1998; McMillan, et al., 2008) as well as pay raises, promotions, organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Elkins, Phillips, & Bozeman, 1999; Folger & Konovsky, 1989; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992; Tang & Sarsfield-Baldwin, 1996). Generally, job offers are determined to be either fair or unfair based on perceived qualifications and value (Pritchard, 1969; Gilliland, 1993). Although individuals that are more sensitive to discrimination, such as women and minorities, may perceive hiring procedures to be unfair if they are not hired (Bobocel, et al., 1998; Cropanzano, et al., 2005; Gilliland, 1993; Leck, et al., 1996) affirmative action or diversity based decisions presented to white applicants as the reasons that they were not hired may lead to similar feelings of procedural injustice.

REACTIONS TO HIRING PROCEDURES AND HIRING DECISIONS

Prior research has shown that the justification provided often influences individuals' opinions of procedural justice (Bies & Shapiro, 1984; Daly, 1995; Folger & Martin, 1986; Kirby & Richard, 1996). When decisions are explained to employees they are more likely to view both the procedure and the outcome as more fair. For example, Richard and Kirby (1997) found that white males perceived more procedural fairness when either the political/legal argument or the problem-solving argument was used to justify the hiring decision than when no justification was provided. We extend this research to include affirmative action, value in diversity, and no justification.

Affirmative action. White nonbeneficiaries often respond negatively to affirmative action programs because they believe the programs are threatening to their own career opportunities (Kluegel & Smith, 1985; Kravitz, 1995; Veilleux & Tougas, 1989). Affirmative action programs are therefore perceived to not be in the best interest of white nonbeneficiaries. As such, nonbeneficiaries' negative reactions to affirmative action programs are related to their own self interest concerns (Walker, et al., 2007).

In addition to concerns related to self interest, nonbeneficiaries' reactions to affirmative action are also related to Gilliland's (1993) model of organizational justice. In other words, nonbeneficiaries may perceive the hiring decision and the hiring process to be unfair because the programs place more weight on demographic characteristics than merit (Kravitz, 1995; Kravitz & Platania, 1993, Veilleux & Tougas, 1989). The merit principle results in negative attitudes toward affirmative action programs, even after controlling for prejudice (Bobocel, et al., 1998). Thus, we expect that white nonbeneficiaries will perceive the hiring decision and the hiring procedure to be less fair when an affirmative action justification is presented than when a value in diversity justification is presented.

Value in diversity. In order to meet the changing demands of consumers, employers are increasing the number of women and minorities they hire in order to benefit from the positive effects of diversity. Diverse perspectives can result in more creative problem solving and decision making that ultimately can lead to an increase in the organization's performance (Cox & Blake, 1991). As such, companies can obtain a competitive advantage by recruiting and hiring women and minorities. Diversity and diversity programs are a business necessity. In fact, when successfully managed, diversity and the resulting diversity initiatives can result in a sustainable competitive advantage (Richard, 2000). However, the success of the programs is dependent on the perceptions of both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries alike.

Berry and Bonilla-Silva (2007) suggest that "diversity" is a more acceptable justification than "past discrimination." Research also suggests that nonbeneficiaries are more likely to support general equal employment opportunity policies but not affirmative action programs (Kluegel, 1985; Kluegel & Smith, 1983). As such we hypothesize that a value in diversity justification will be perceived as fairer than affirmative action or no justification.

No justification. Research indicates that the lack of justification for organizational decisions can have a negative impact on employee attitudes and behavior. For example, inadequate/no justification can result in increased turnover intentions, increased withdrawal behaviors, decreased organizational citizenship behaviors, and retaliation efforts (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1990; Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991). While nonbeneficiaries may not participate in withdrawal behaviors or decreased citizenship behaviors, they are likely to relay negative information to others about the organization. It is important, therefore, that managers and human resource professionals provide adequate justification to both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries.

In summary, it is expected that white individuals will perceive a value in diversity justification as more fair than both an affirmative action and no justification, and these individuals will perceive that no justification is more fair than an affirmative action justification. It is expected that these perceptions will hold for both the hiring decision and the hiring process. Thus, the following hypotheses are posited.

- H1:** White nonbeneficiaries will perceive the hiring decision to be fairer when a value in diversity justification is used than when an affirmative action justification is used.
- H2:** White nonbeneficiaries will perceive the hiring decision to be fairer when a value in diversity justification is used than when no justification is used.
- H3:** White nonbeneficiaries will perceive the hiring decision to be fairer when no justification is used than when an affirmative action justification is used.
- H4:** White nonbeneficiaries will perceive the hiring procedure to be fairer when a value in diversity justification is used than when an affirmative action justification is used.
- H5:** White nonbeneficiaries will perceive the hiring procedure to be fairer when a value in diversity justification is used than when no justification is used.
- H6:** White nonbeneficiaries will perceive the hiring procedure to be fairer when no justification is used than when an affirmative action justification is used.

METHODOLOGY

The current study investigated a sample of white respondents and their perceptions of fairness regarding a company's decision to hire a minority candidate instead of them based on information contained in vignettes. Vignettes and surveys were distributed to students at a large public university located in North Carolina. The vignettes and surveys were distributed to the participants during class time and during regularly scheduled meeting times for various business and social clubs. After reading each vignette, participants responded to a brief survey regarding the information contained in the vignette.

After cleaning the data and excluding surveys that were incomplete, a total usable sample of 117 surveys was collected. Of the total usable sample, 52% were male and the average age was 23. In addition, 31% of the respondents reported having full time work experience, 62% reported having part time work experience and 7% of the sample had no work experience.

Measures

Short vignettes were used to describe employment application situations. Following each of the vignettes, all respondents were presented with a short survey. The surveys contained four modified questions from Moorman's procedural justice scale to determine the respondents' perceptions of procedural fairness (Moorman, 1991). For example, "the procedures used to select people for this job were fair." Next, four questions were modified from Moorman's distributive justice scale to determine the respondents' perceptions of distributive justice (Moorman, 1991). For example, "Overall I am satisfied with the hiring decision." Finally, after each vignette, the survey contained two questions used to ensure that the respondent had read and understood the vignette. For example, "I was hired for the job at Lythaus Industries."

Vignettes

Respondents were given a packet that included three different vignettes. In each case, the respondent was asked to think about a job application situation at a fictitious company. The job was described as one that they are very interested in at a diversified company with an impressive history of growth and excellent career opportunities. In each vignette, the respondent had a general knowledge of the other applicant that had applied for the position.

According to the vignette, the respondents know that the other applicant is equally qualified and that the other applicant is from a minority race. In all three vignettes, the other applicant was offered the position and then the vignettes offered one of three methods of explaining the decision to the white applicant who was not offered the job. The order of the various vignettes was randomized to minimize any order effects.

One method explained that the human resources manager called and stated that the organization had recently instituted a new program designed to recruit minorities in order to increase the number of diverse views represented in the organization. The organization hoped to achieve a competitive advantage by hiring minorities, and therefore, the other applicant was hired. The second method explained that the human resources manager called and stated that organization had recently undertaken a new initiative to meet certain affirmative action goals. Because the organization is dedicated to hiring underrepresented minorities, the minority applicant was hired to increase the number of minority employees. The third vignette explained that, after the interview process, the human resources manager called and stated that the other applicant was hired. No other information was provided.

RESULTS

To test the hypotheses, a paired-sample *t*-test was conducted using the three justification variables. No justification, a diversity justification, and the affirmative action justification were examined under both the hiring procedure and hiring decision criterion. The means and standard deviations of these variables for both hiring decision and hiring procedure are found in Table 1.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Hiring Procedure and Hiring Decision

Justification	Hiring Decision		Hiring Procedure	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
No Justification	11.38	1.73	13.65	3.07
Diversity Justification	10.89	1.82	10.67	3.45
Affirmative Action	9.94	1.91	9.15	3.09

Hypothesis 1 stated that the hiring decision will be perceived as more fair when a value in diversity justification is used than when an affirmative action justification is used. The results indicate a statistically significant difference, and that the diversity justification is indeed perceived as more fair than the affirmative action justification with a mean difference of .949 ($t = 4.64, p < .05$). These results can be seen in Table 2. Hypothesis 2, which states that the hiring decision will be perceived as more fair when a diversity justification is used rather than when no justification is used, did yield significant results ($t = -2.40, p < .05$). These results, however, are a reverse of what was predicted. With a mean difference of -.487, the results indicate that no justification is perceived as fairer than a diversity justification in the hiring decision. Hypothesis 3, which states no justification given for the hiring decision is perceived as more fair than an affirmative action justification, was also supported with a mean difference of 1.44 ($t = 6.40, p < .05$).

Table 2
Paired Samples *t*-test – Hiring Decision

Pair	Mean	Std. Dev.	S.E. Mean	95% Conf. Int.		<i>t</i>	df	Sig.
				Lower	Upper			
1. Value Diversity -Affirmative Action	.949	2.21	.21	.54	1.35	4.64	116	.00
2. Value Diversity - No Justification	-.487	2.20	.20	-.89	-.08	-2.40	116	.02
3. No Justification -Affirmative Action	1.44	2.42	.22	.99	1.88	6.40	116	.00

A paired sample *t*-test was also used to examine the hiring procedure hypotheses. Hypothesis 4 stated that the hiring procedure will be perceived as more fair when a value in diversity justification is used than when an affirmative action justification is used. The paired-sample *t*-test indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the means ($t = 4.75, p < .05$) and that the diversity justification is perceived as being more fair with a mean difference of 1.53. These results can be seen in Table 3. The results for hypothesis 5 are similar to those of hypothesis 2. While the analysis did indicate a significant difference for hypothesis 5, which posited that a diversity justification is perceived to be fairer than when no justification is given, the results indicate that the relationship is reversed. The mean difference between the two variables is -2.97 ($t = -7.15, p < .05$). This shows that in the hiring procedure, no justification given is perceived to be fairer than when a diversity justification is given. Hypothesis 6, which states that no justification is perceived as more fair than an affirmative action justification in the hiring procedure, was also supported with a mean difference of 4.52 ($t = 12.01, p < .05$).

Table 3
Paired Samples t-test – Hiring Procedure

Pair	Mean	Std. Dev.	S. E. Mean	95% Conf. Int.		<i>t</i>	df	Sig.
				Lower	Upper			
1. Value Diversity -Affirmative Action	1.53	3.46	.321	.890	2.16	4.75	115	.00
2. Value Diversity - No Justification	-2.97	4.48	.416	-3.80	-2.15	-7.15	115	.00
3. No Justification -Affirmative Action	4.52	4.07	.377	3.78	5.27	12.01	116	.00

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to investigate how affirmative action and diversity program justifications and scenarios involving no justification for hiring procedures and hiring decisions impact white nonbeneficiaries’ perceptions of fairness. The results for the procedural and distributive justice hypotheses were strikingly similar. Both the diversity justification and no justification were perceived to be fairer than the affirmative action justification for both procedural and distributive justice. Interestingly, however, the respondents perceived no justification to be fairer than the diversity justification. Of the three different scenarios, no justification was perceived to be the most fair and affirmative action was perceived to be the least fair justification.

These results may be representative of a general dislike of affirmative action policies. As mentioned earlier, individuals often hold negative attitudes about affirmative action programs (Harrison et al., 2006). The current study supports previous findings related to the perceived fairness of affirmative action. It is clear that the respondents would prefer to receive no information when they are not offered a job as opposed to hearing they were not offered a job based on an affirmative action policy. We question whether this is because of a dislike for affirmative action programs or because when no justification is offered the respondents have the opportunity to create their own reality.

Some additional theories may help explain why no justification is perceived to be fairer than both the diversity and affirmative action justifications. First, individuals generally act in a way to protect their own self-image and self-esteem (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997; Festinger, 1954). It is possible that when given no justification, respondents create an individualized justification that they believe is fair. In addition, equity theory has revealed that when individuals first find themselves in an inequitable situation when compared to a similar other, they may psychologically distort the inputs or outcomes of themselves or the other candidate (Adams, 1963).

Finally, a third possible explanation for the no justification preference may be attributed to the proposed relationship between the candidates that was explained in the scenarios. In each scenario the respondents understood that the other candidate was a person that they knew and was equally qualified. They had taken classes together and graduated from the same program. It is possible that the nonbeneficiaries’ perceptions of justice were affected by their relationship with the other candidate. They may believe both the hiring decision and process were fairer

because they know that the other candidate was well qualified. When provided with the diversity justification, the nonbeneficiary can rationalize the other candidate being hired based on an organizational diversity strategy. In other words, diversity is a more agreeable justification than affirmative action. The decision to hire the other person based on an affirmative action justification is less palatable to the nonbeneficiary because of the stigmas associated with affirmative action. As mentioned previously, individuals hired through affirmative action programs are perceived to be less qualified than those individuals hired on merit alone. The nonbeneficiary may not want that stigma to be attached to his/her acquaintance.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are a few limitations worth noting. First, the current research was conducted using a student sample. Although 93% of the sample had work experience and over 30% had full time work experience, the study should be replicated with more full time workers. In addition, we used vignettes instead of actual beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries. Given the topic of research, it would be difficult to find respondents that fit the nonbeneficiary role we were testing. It would also be difficult to get organizations to agree to let us have access to both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries and the reasons for the hiring processes and decisions. Future research should include other racioethnic individuals. Additional research that investigates why nonbeneficiaries not only perceived no justification to be fairer but why they perceived the different justifications in the order that they did is necessary. It might be possible to test these relationships in a laboratory setting with the use of confederates. Instead of using vignettes, individuals could apply for different jobs where they are competing with other applicants they know. Regardless of the type of study conducted, future research needs to clarify why nonbeneficiaries perceive no justification to be fairer than diversity and affirmative justification. Without understanding “why” we cannot resolve the negative feelings and attitudes or address the reasons for these feelings related to diversity programs and affirmative action.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

W. Lee Grubb III is an Associate Professor of Management at East Carolina University. His research interests include selection and assessment tests, emotional intelligence, organizational justice and employee diversity. Please direct any questions regarding this study to him at grubbw@ecu.edu.

Amy McMillan-Capehart is an Associate Professor of Management at East Carolina University. Her research interests include organizational diversity, diversity initiatives, diversity reputation, and psychological contracts. Dr. Capehart has published in journals such as *Equal Opportunities International*, *Group and Organization Management*, *Journal of Business and Management*, and *Journal of Business Research*.

William C. McDowell is an Assistant Professor of Management in the College of Business at East Carolina University. He holds a Ph.D. in Business Administration from the University of North Texas. His current research interests include interorganizational relationships, trust, small business development, entrepreneurship and organizational efficacy. His research has appeared in various journals including the *Journal of Managerial Issues*, *Information Resources Management Journal*, the *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*, *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, and others.

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