



## How believing in affirmative action quotas protects White men's self-esteem <sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

We propose that White men derive a psychological benefit from believing that affirmative action is a quota-based policy. Three studies provide evidence that quota beliefs protect White men's self-esteem by boosting their sense of self-competence. Study 1 found a positive relationship between quota beliefs and self-esteem that was mediated by self-perceived competence. In Studies 2 and 3, the belief in affirmative action quotas—whether measured or experimentally manipulated—protected White men's self-esteem from self-image threatening feedback. Only participants who did not believe in quotas reported a lower self-esteem after being told they had performed poorly on an intelligence test. As in Study 1, this effect was mediated by self-perceived competence. In all, these studies suggest that the belief that affirmative action is a quota policy may persist, in part, because it benefits White men's self-esteem.

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### Introduction

Since its inception, affirmative action has evoked a great deal of debate and controversy. Despite the considerable amount of attention the policy receives, the belief that affirmative action discriminates against White men by setting aside jobs or admission slots solely for underrepresented minorities persists (Haley & Sidanius, 2006; Kravitz & Platania, 1993). This belief persists in spite of court cases like the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. (1978) that specifically outlaw

the use of quotas (see also *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003) and other evidence that present-day affirmative action policies tend not to utilize this controversial procedure (Dale, 1995; see also Crosby, 2004). Although the belief that affirmative action utilizes quotas may in part reflect misinformation about the policy (Pincus, 2003), we suggest that an additional, more psychologically interesting reason may explain why this belief persists among individuals who do not directly benefit from the policy. Specifically, we suggest that the belief that affirmative action is a quota policy persists, in part, because this belief benefits the self-esteem of White men.

We draw from two distinct lines of research to suggest that believing in quotas benefits White men's self-esteem. The first line of research examines White Americans' beliefs about affirmative action and the second line examines the effect of believing that one's group is discriminated against on self-esteem.

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*White Americans' beliefs about affirmative action*

White Americans' support for affirmative action depends in large part on the specific procedures they think the policy entails. For example, past research has shown that when White Americans think affirmative action entails quota procedures, support for the policy tends to be especially low because quota policies are perceived to inflict greater harm on fellow Whites relative to "weaker" forms of affirmative action (e.g., outreach policies, supplemental training policies; Kravitz, 1995; Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006). Consistent with this idea, a pilot study conducted for the present paper found that the more White men believed that affirmative action entails quotas, the more they perceived the policy as discriminating against their group ( $r = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ ).<sup>1</sup> As such, it appears that for White men, believing that affirmative action is a quota is tantamount to believing that affirmative action discriminates against their group.

*Self-esteem protection via perceived discrimination*

A second line of research suggests that perceiving the self as a target of discrimination can protect individuals' self-esteem from threatening feedback when this feedback can be blamed on discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989). For example, women and African Americans report less negative affect and higher self-esteem when a negative evaluation (i.e., a self-esteem threat) can be attributed to the prejudice of an evaluator than when prejudice is not an available explanation for a negative evaluation (Crocker, Voelk, Testa, & Major, 1991). Similarly, when White men are passed over for assignment to a high status role, those who can attribute this rejection to a policy resembling affirmative action express less negative affect relative to those who cannot make this external attribution (Major, Feinstein, & Crocker, 1994). This line of research suggests that perceiving the self as a target of discrimination can, under some circumstances, protect individuals' self-esteem by allowing them to blame failure on discrimination and not on themselves.

<sup>1</sup> In this pilot study, 62 White men (*mean age* = 32.85, *SD* = 10.59) completed an online survey in exchange for a \$5 gift certificate to an online retailer. Participants completed the 2-item measure of quota beliefs used in Studies 1, 2, and 3 of the present paper ( $\alpha = .81$ ). Perceptions of discrimination were measured with the following Likert scale items anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree): "Affirmative action discriminates against White men," "Affirmative action does *not* discriminate against White men" (reverse coded), and "Affirmative action is basically 'reverse discrimination'" ( $\alpha = .85$ ). As expected, believing that affirmative action is a quota ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) was positively correlated with the belief that affirmative action discriminates against White men ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ;  $r = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

However, this line of research implies that the self-protective benefits associated with perceived discrimination are limited to threats that can be blamed on discrimination. For example, a prototypical study in this research stream found that the self-esteem of African-American participants was protected from a negative evaluation only when participants believed that an evaluator was cognizant of their race. When African-American participants believed that the evaluator was unaware of their race, their self-esteem was adversely affected by a negative evaluation (Crocker et al., 1991). Thus, the belief that African Americans are targets of discrimination protected the self-esteem of Black participants only when discrimination was a direct and probable explanation for a negative evaluation. From this perspective, the belief that affirmative action entails quotas should only benefit White men's self-esteem in situations where the policy can be blamed for a negative outcome (e.g., not getting a promotion or getting denied admission to a selective college).

In the present paper, we argue that quota beliefs may protect White men's self-esteem in a broader sense. Specifically, the belief that affirmative action is a quota-based policy may protect White men from threats to their self-esteem that cannot be blamed on the influence of affirmative action. We suggest that invoking the belief that affirmative action is a quota-based policy may allow White men to retrospectively blame past failures on discrimination and not on themselves. In addition, perceiving the self as a target of discrimination may also allow White men to retrospectively augment successes as having been achieved despite the discriminatory influence of quota-based policies (Kelley, 1973). This retrospective discounting of failures and augmenting of successes may result in a boost to White men's *general* sense of competence, which, in turn, may protect their self-esteem from threats that cannot be blamed on any specific source of perceived discrimination. In this way, perceived discrimination (*vis-à-vis* the belief that affirmative action is a quota) may protect White men from a wider range of threats than suggested by previous research (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1991; Major et al., 1994).

*Hypotheses and overview of studies*

We hypothesize that the belief that affirmative action entails quotas will protect White men's self-esteem from threats to their self-image by boosting their general sense of competence. Moreover, we expect to find that the belief in quotas will protect White men's self-esteem even from a threat that cannot be directly blamed on the influence of supposed quotas. Three studies were conducted to test these hypotheses.

In each study, we seek to establish that self-perceived competence mediates the relationship between quota beliefs and self-esteem. This mediation is critical because

our argument hinges on demonstrating that quota beliefs protect White men's self-esteem by boosting these individuals' sense of self-competence.<sup>2</sup> Studies 2 and 3 directly test the hypothesis that quota beliefs protect White men's self-esteem from a threat that cannot be attributed to the influence of discriminatory quotas.

## Study 1

Study 1 was designed to examine if the belief that affirmative action is a quota is related to White men's self-perceived competence and self-esteem. If, as predicted, believing in quotas boosts White men's self-perceived competence, then we should find a positive relationship between the belief that that affirmative action is a quota policy and their self-perceptions of competence. In turn, this boosted sense of self-competence should be positively related to White men's self-esteem.

### Method

#### Participants

Thirty-six White male undergraduates from a private West Coast university completed an online questionnaire in exchange for a \$5 gift certificate to an online retailer. Age range for participants was 18–22 years ( $M = 19.97$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ).

#### Procedure

The study was described as consisting of two unrelated surveys. Survey 1 was described as a survey of policy attitudes and contained items assessing participants' affirmative action beliefs. Survey 2 was described as a survey of self-perceptions and contained scales assessing participants' self-perceived competence and self-esteem. Upon completing the second survey, participants were presented with a written debriefing that explained the true purpose of the study and provided them with a summary of the manner in which affirmative action is supposed to operate in the present-day.

<sup>2</sup> To establish that the measures of self-perceived competence and self-esteem are distinct constructs, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis on the self-perceived competence and self-esteem data collected in Studies 1, 2, and 3 ( $N = 190$ ). We compared the fit of a model in which the covariance between self-perceived competence and self-esteem was restricted to 1 to an unrestricted model in which the factors were allowed to covary freely. The restricted model produced a significant decline in model fit,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 7.65$ ,  $p < .01$ , suggesting that the constructs of self-perceived competence and self-esteem are better represented by a two factor model ( $GFI = .666$ ,  $AGFI = .596$ ,  $RMSEA = .138$ ) as opposed to a single factor model ( $GFI = .663$ ,  $AGFI = .590$ ,  $RMSEA = .130$ ).

### Measures

**Quota beliefs.** To assess participants' quota beliefs, we used two slightly modified items from Kravitz and Platanía's (1993) affirmative action components scale. The items used were, "Your university's affirmative action plan involves quotas for minority group members," and "Your university's affirmative action plan requires your university to grant admission to a specific number of minority group members." Participants were asked to indicate the likelihood that each statement was characteristic of their university's affirmative action policy (1 = not likely at all, 7 = very likely). The quota belief measure consisted of the average of these two items,  $r = .85$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Self-perceived competence.** To assess participants' self-perceived competence, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which 12 adjectives were descriptive of themselves using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). The adjectives were: ambitious, hard-working, responsible, stable, persistent, qualified, confident, smart, competent, skilled, intelligent, and insightful ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Self-esteem.** The Rosenberg self-esteem scale was used to measure participant self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). Sample items include: "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others." Participants responded to each item on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The scale exhibited adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

### Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the measured variables are provided in Table 1. As predicted, the more participants thought their university used quotas the greater their self-perceived competence and self-esteem. To determine if the relationship between quota beliefs and self-esteem was mediated by self-perceived competence we conducted a mediation analysis in accordance with the procedure recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). As already noted, quota beliefs were positively related to both self-perceived competence,  $B = .26$ ,  $SE B = .08$ ,  $\beta = .49$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 =$

Table 1  
Study 1 means, standard deviations, and correlations among measured variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Quota belief	2.59	1.42		
2. Self-perceived competence	5.70	.76	.49**	
3. Self-esteem	5.52	.88	.36*	.68**

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

.24, and self-esteem,  $B = .22$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $\beta = .36$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .13$ . Also consistent with the possibility of mediation, self-perceived competence was positively related to self-esteem,  $B = .78$ ,  $SE B = .15$ ,  $\beta = .68$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $R^2 = .46$ . To test the final component of our mediation hypothesis, we regressed self-esteem on quota beliefs while controlling for self-perceived competence. This analysis found that the direct effect between quota beliefs and self-esteem became non-significant once self-perceived competence was controlled,  $B = .03$ ,  $SE B = .09$ ,  $\beta = .05$ ,  $p = .76$ ,  $R^2 = .45$ . A Sobel test verified that the attenuation of the direct relationship between quota perceptions and self-esteem was significant ( $z = 2.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

An alternative explanation for the mediation pattern described above is that self-perceived competence and self-esteem merely competed for the same variance. To test this alternative hypothesis, we reversed the regression analyses described above, this time using self-esteem as the mediator and self-competence as the dependent variable. Results from these analyses revealed that the direct relationship between quota beliefs and self-competence remained significant even after controlling for self-esteem,  $B = .15$ ,  $SE B = .07$ ,  $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .52$ . Thus, self-esteem and self-perceived competence are not interchangeable as mediator and criterion variables.

### Discussion

The results of Study 1 are consistent with the idea that quota beliefs protect White men's self-esteem by boosting their self-perceived competence. Specifically, this study found that among a sample of White male college students, the belief that their university's affirmative action policy utilizes quotas was positively related to their general sense of competence; in turn, self-perceived competence was positively related to self-esteem.

Although these results are consistent with our main hypotheses, this study does not directly test the hypothesis that quota beliefs can be used to protect self-esteem from a threat that cannot be directly blamed on the influence of quotas. To directly test this hypothesis, in Study 2 we experimentally manipulated White men's need to protect their self-esteem by exposing members of this group to self-esteem threatening feedback.

### Study 2

If White men can use the belief that affirmative action is a quota policy to protect their self-esteem from a threat to their self-image, then the self-esteem of White men who possess this belief should be unaffected by such a threat. Conversely, those who do not possess the self-esteem protecting belief in quotas should report lower levels of self-esteem after exposure to a threat to the self.

Alternatively, it could also be that threat motivates White men to see affirmative action in a manner that most benefits their self-esteem (i.e., as a quota). If this is the case, then we should find that the belief in quotas should be highest among participants exposed to a self-esteem threat. Thus, Study 2 presents us with an opportunity to determine if White men strategically recruit the belief in affirmative action quotas in order to protect their self-esteem.

Although Study 1 suggests that self-perceived competence mediates the relationship between quota beliefs and self-esteem, White men's perceptions of those who benefit from affirmative action stands out as another interesting and plausible mediator of the quota to self-esteem relationship. Past research has shown that affirmative action beneficiaries (i.e., African Americans, Latino/a Americans, and women of all races) can be stigmatized as incompetent as a result of affirmative action policies (Evans, 2003; Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997; Resendez, 2002). Other research has shown that downward social comparisons to stereotyped targets like ethnic minorities result in self-esteem benefits for members of dominant groups (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Walton & Cohen, 2003). Accordingly, it is possible that White men who believe affirmative action is a quota engage in a downward social comparison to affirmative action beneficiaries and that this downward comparison mediates the relationship between quota beliefs and self-esteem. Moreover, such a finding would suggest that the effect of quota beliefs on White men's self-esteem is occurring through an other-focused, as opposed to a self-focused, process.

However, if perceptions of beneficiaries' competence do not mediate the quota to self-esteem relationship, this null finding would suggest that affirmative action quota beliefs benefit the self-esteem of White men by making these individuals feel competent, independent of their perceptions of racial others. Such a finding would be consistent with recent research suggesting that White Americans' contemporary views on race are more influenced by concerns for themselves and their in-group as opposed to a desire to harm members of non-White groups (Lowery et al., 2006; see also Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, in press).

Finally, in order to extend the generalizability of our findings to affirmative action outside the context of higher education, in Study 2 we recruited participants from outside the university setting and inquired about their beliefs regarding affirmative action in the workplace.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were recruited from a nation-wide participant database maintained at a private West coast



university. To extend the generalizability of the study beyond college-aged populations, we limited recruitment to individuals over the age of 25. A total of 69 White men, with ages ranging from 27 to 63 ( $M = 41.86$ ,  $SD = 9.66$ ) completed a web-based questionnaire in exchange for a \$5 gift certificate to an online retailer. In addition to providing a wider age range than Study 1, the sample used in Study 2 also varied considerably in educational achievement. Participants had an average of 4.67 years ( $SD = 3.33$ ) of post-secondary education.

#### *Procedure*

Participants were emailed a website URL linking to the study materials. Instructions to the study led participants to believe that they would complete a series unrelated surveys. The first survey was described as a project designed to collect psychometric data on a test commonly used by organizations in the hiring process. Participants were informed that such data were needed because little empirical research had been conducted on the properties of the test. In reality, of course, the test was the self-esteem threat manipulation. After completing the test participants were randomly assigned to receive either positive or negative feedback.

After receiving false feedback on their test performance, participants were informed that they would next complete three unrelated surveys concerning their beliefs about a social policy and their self-perceptions. These ostensibly unrelated surveys contained the measures of affirmative action quota beliefs, self-perceived competence, self-esteem, and perceptions of beneficiaries' competence. Finally, participants were presented with a written debriefing that explained the purpose of the study, assured them that the test feedback was not diagnostic of their intelligence, and provided a summary of the manner in which affirmative action is legally allowed to operate in the present-day.

#### *Manipulated and measured variables*

*Threat manipulation.* The test administered to participants consisted of 15 items taken from the verbal and logic sections of various Graduate Record Examination (GRE) practice tests. In keeping with past research, only relatively difficult items (i.e., those having a 40% or lower correct response rate) were included in order to make participants uncertain about the accuracy of their responses (Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991). After completing this test, participants in the negative feedback condition were informed that their score ranked in the 11th percentile. In contrast, participants in the positive feedback condition were told their score ranked in the 89th percentile.

*Quota beliefs.* Participants' belief in affirmative action quotas was measured using the two items from Kravitz

and Platania's (1993) affirmative action components scale used in Study 1. Items were slightly reworded to apply to a workplace context: "Affirmative action involves quotas for minority group members," and "Affirmative action requires that companies hire a specific number of minority group members" (1 = not likely at all, 7 = extremely likely). The affirmative action quota belief measure consisted of the average of these two items,  $r = .70$ ,  $p < .01$ .

*Self-perceived competence.* Participants' self-perceived competence was measured using the same 12-item scale used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

*Self-esteem.* As in Study 1, self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Perceptions of beneficiaries' competence.* Perceptions of beneficiaries' competence were measured using the 12 items from the scale used to measure self-perceptions of competence ( $\alpha = .96$ ). Instructions for completing this measure read as follows:

"We understand that it is difficult to make judgments about entire groups of people. But in general, to what extent do you think the following traits describe minority employees (i.e., African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women of any race)? Please respond to the items below by indicating the number that best reflects your perceptions. Please answer honestly and recall that this survey does NOT contain any identifying information; any responses you provide will be completely anonymous."

*Manipulation check.* To make sure that the false feedback provided to participants was understood as intended, at the end of the third survey participants were asked to indicate how well they performed on the test by responding to the following item: "How would you rate your performance on the intelligence test you took in Survey 1?" (1 = very poor, 4 = average, 7 = very good).

#### *Results*

##### *Preliminary analyses*

The manipulation check at the end of the survey indicated that participants understood the feedback manipulation as intended—participants in the positive feedback condition ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) rated their test performance as significantly better than participants in the negative feedback condition ( $M = 1.41$ ,  $SD = .61$ ),  $t(67) = 19.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .85$ .

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the measured variables can be found in Table 2. Consistent with Study 1, self-perceived competence and self-esteem were positively correlated. Replicating past research, the belief in quotas was negatively correlated with percep-

Table 2

Study 2 means, standard deviations, and correlations among measured variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Quota belief	5.38	1.53			
2. Self-perceived competence	5.92	.50	.02		
3. Self-esteem	5.66	.93	.11	.59**	
4. Beneficiaries' competence	4.74	1.02	-.39**	.23 <sup>†</sup>	.23 <sup>†</sup>

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

tions of beneficiaries' competence (Evans, 2003; Heilman et al., 1992, 1997; Resendez, 2002).

### Main analyses

**Quota beliefs.** To test the possibility that threat induces participants to perceive affirmative action in a manner that benefits their self-esteem—that is, as a quota—we examined the effect of test feedback on quota beliefs. This analysis revealed that individuals were no more likely to believe that affirmative action entails quotas in the negative feedback condition ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) than in the positive feedback condition ( $M = 5.47$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $t(67) = .52$ ,  $p = .61$ .

**Self-esteem.** To assess the impact of test feedback and quota beliefs on participants' self-esteem, we regressed self-esteem on feedback, quota beliefs, and the interaction between these two variables. Neither feedback,  $B = .08$ ,  $SE B = .11$ ,  $\beta = .09$ ,  $p = .47$ , nor quota beliefs,  $B = .07$ ,  $SE B = .07$ ,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .36$ , produced a significant main effect. However, as predicted, there was a significant Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction,  $B = -.15$ ,  $SE B = .07$ ,  $\beta = -.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .08$  (see Fig. 1).

To better understand the pattern of this interaction, we conducted a simple slope analysis using the procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991). This analysis revealed that participants with a low belief in quotas (one standard deviation below the mean) reported lower levels of self-esteem after receiving negative feedback as compared to positive feedback,  $B = .34$ ,  $SE B = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .08$ . In contrast, the self-esteem of participants with a high belief in quotas (one standard deviation above the mean) was unaffected by feedback,  $B = -.15$ ,  $SE B = .16$ ,  $p = .33$ .

**Self-competence.** The analysis of self-perceived competence revealed no main effect for either quota belief,  $B = .01$ ,  $SE B = .04$ ,  $\beta = .02$ ,  $p = .83$ , or feedback,  $B = .04$ ,  $SE B = .06$ ,  $\beta = .07$ ,  $p = .57$ . However, a significant Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction was found,  $B = -.09$ ,  $SE B = .04$ ,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .08$ .

Replicating the effect for self-esteem, simple slope analyses revealed that participants with a low belief in quotas reported lower levels of self-perceived competence in the negative feedback condition relative to the

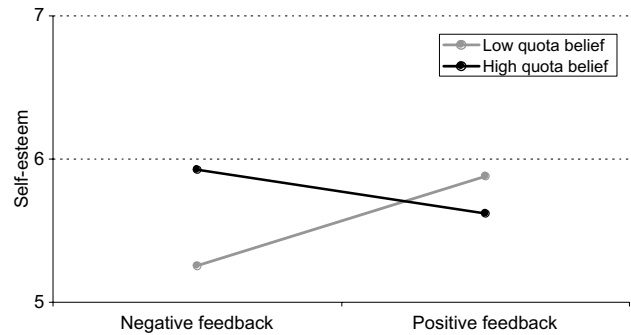


Fig. 1. Self-esteem as a function of feedback and affirmative action quota belief (Study 2).

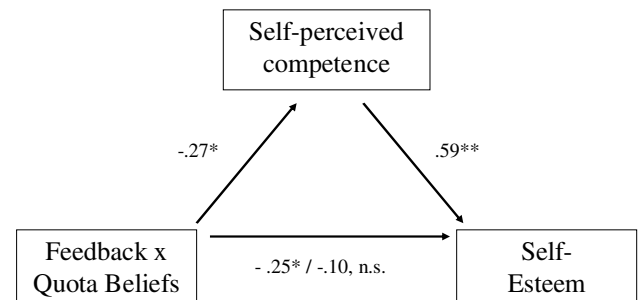


Fig. 2. Mediation analysis for Study 2.

positive feedback condition,  $B = .19$ ,  $SE B = .09$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .08$ . Conversely, for participants with a high belief in quotas, self-perceived competence was unaffected by feedback,  $B = -.10$ ,  $SE B = .09$ ,  $p = .22$ .

**Mediation analysis.** We hypothesized that the belief in affirmative action quotas protects White men's self-esteem by boosting their self-perceived competence. To empirically test this hypothesis, we conducted a mediation analysis to assess if the Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction on self-esteem was mediated by self-perceived competence. To this end, we conducted a simultaneous regression analysis in which feedback, quota belief, the Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction term, and self-perceived competence were used to predict self-esteem. As depicted in Fig. 2, this analysis found that when we control for the effect of self-perceived competence, the previously significant effect of the Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction on self-esteem becomes non-significant,  $B = -.06$ ,  $SE B = .06$ ,  $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p = .34$ ,  $R^2 = .37$ . A Sobel test confirmed that the drop in the interaction term's predictive power was significant ( $z = 2.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Beneficiary competence.** To test the possibility that quota beliefs are associated with decreased perceptions of beneficiaries' competence, we regressed perceptions of beneficiaries' competence on feedback, quota belief, and the Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction term. This

analysis revealed a significant main effect of quota belief such that the more participants believed affirmative action was a quota the less competent they perceived beneficiaries to be,  $B = -.27$ ,  $SE B = .08$ ,  $\beta = -.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .16$ . However, neither the main effect of feedback,  $B = .16$ ,  $SE B = .11$ ,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .16$ , nor the Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction was significant,  $B = -.01$ ,  $SE B = .08$ ,  $\beta = -.01$ ,  $p = .97$ . The fact that the Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction does not predict perceptions of beneficiary competence precludes the possibility that perceptions of beneficiaries' competence mediate the effect of the Feedback  $\times$  Quota Belief interaction on self-esteem.

It is also possible that the effect of perceptions of beneficiaries' competence on self-esteem was moderated by feedback. In other words, after a threat to self-esteem, participants may have both derogated beneficiaries of affirmative action and used these negative perceptions to protect their self-esteem. To empirically test this possibility, we regressed self-esteem onto beneficiary competence, feedback, and the interaction between these two variables. None of these effects approached significance ( $p$ 's ranging from .36 to .76). Thus, it appears that affirmative action quota beliefs protect White men's self-esteem by boosting their sense of self-competence and not by allowing these individuals to engage in a downward social comparison by derogating those who benefit from affirmative action.

### Discussion

Study 2 provides evidence for the idea that believing in affirmative action quotas can protect White men from threats to their self-esteem. Specifically, this study found that individuals who believe affirmative action entails quotas can use this belief to boost their self-perceived competence and, in turn, protect their self-esteem from negative feedback. In contrast, the self-esteem and self-perceived competence of those who do not believe in affirmative action quotas was adversely affected by negative feedback. We suggest that these individuals lack the self-esteem protecting belief that affirmative action is a quota, and consequently are adversely affected by the negative feedback.

Study 2 also provides evidence that, even though members of beneficiary groups are derogated by White men as a function of their belief that affirmative action is a quota, this derogation does not account for the protective effect of quota beliefs on White men's self-esteem. This finding suggests that White men's beliefs about the manner in which quotas affect them personally (and not a belief about how quotas affect members of beneficiary groups) is what accounts for the psychologically beneficial aspect of believing in quotas. In other words, it appears that the self-esteem benefits derived by White men from quota beliefs occur through a self-focused,

as opposed to an other-focused process. This finding is consistent with recent research suggesting that White Americans' views on race related are influenced more by a concern for the self and the in-group, independent of a concern for racial others (Lowery et al., 2006; see also Lowery et al., in press).

### Study 3

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 provide evidence for the hypothesis that believing in affirmative action quotas bolsters White men's self-esteem by boosting their self-perceived competence. However, because to this point the belief in affirmative action quotas has been a measured variable, the possibility remains that a correlate of quota beliefs and not quota beliefs *per se*, is what protected White men's self-esteem in Study 2. To directly address this issue, Study 3 experimentally manipulates participants' beliefs about the procedures affirmative action entails.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants were recruited from a nation-wide participant database maintained at a private West coast university. Like in Study 2, we limited recruitment to individuals over the age of 25 in order to make certain that our sample was composed of non-college age individuals. A total of 85 White men, with ages ranging from 27 to 63 ( $M = 39.12$ ,  $SD = 8.93$ ) completed the web-based questionnaire in exchange for a \$5 gift certificate to an online retailer. On average participants had completed 3.52 years ( $SD = 3.53$ ) of post-high school education.

#### Procedure

The procedure in Study 3 was similar to the one used in Study 2. Participants were informed that they would complete an intelligence test to aid in the analysis of the test's psychometric properties. After completing the test and receiving false feedback regarding their test performance, participants were asked to complete two ostensibly unrelated surveys. Like in Study 2, the second survey was presented as a study of policy attitudes. However, unlike Study 2, we manipulated participants' beliefs about affirmative action instead of measuring their affirmative action quota beliefs. After completing Survey 2, participants were asked to complete a third survey concerning their self-perceptions. The self-perceived competence and self-esteem scales were included here.

#### Manipulated and measured variables

*Threat manipulation.* The threat manipulation was identical to the one used in Study 2. Participants completed a 15-item intelligence test, and after completing this test

they were presented with either positive (89th percentile) or negative (11th percentile) feedback.

*Quota beliefs.* At the beginning of the second survey participants were informed that in order to more accurately assess their opinions about affirmative action they would be presented with a brief description detailing how the policy typically operates in organizations across the United States. At this point, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two affirmative action policy descriptions—a non-quota policy description or a quota policy description. Participants in the non-quota policy condition read the following:

Most businesses utilize affirmative action policies that consider race as one of many attributes in determining whether to hire an applicant. These policies do not permit the use of hiring quotas. In other words, businesses do not set aside a specific number of hiring slots that can only be filled by underrepresented minority applicants (US General Accounting Office Report on Affirmative Action, 2003, p. 102).

Participants in the quota policy condition read the following:

Most businesses utilize affirmative action policies that require a specific number of minority applicants to be hired every year. These policies permit the use of hiring quotas. In other words, businesses set aside a specific number of hiring slots that can only be filled by underrepresented minority applicants (US General Accounting Office Report on Affirmative Action, 2003, p. 102).

After reading one of these descriptions participants were asked to indicate how fair they thought the policy was (1 = not fair at all, 7 = extremely fair) and how much they supported the policy (1 = do not support at all, 7 = support a great deal). The average of these two items was calculated to create an affirmative action support variable,  $r = .87$ ,  $p < .01$ .

*Self-competence.* Participants' perceptions of competence were measured using the same 12-item scale used in Studies 1 and 2 ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

*Self-esteem.* Self-esteem was measured using the same scale from Studies 1 and 2 (Rosenberg, 1965;  $\alpha = .89$ ).

*Manipulation checks.* To verify that the self-image threat manipulation was interpreted as intended, participants were asked to indicate how well they performed on the test by answering the following item: "How would you rate your performance on the intelligence test you took in Survey 1?" (1 = very poor, 4 = average, 7 = very good).

Also, to verify that the affirmative action belief manipulation worked as intended, participants were

asked to respond to the quota belief items used in Studies 1 and 2: "Affirmative action involves quotas for minority group members," and "Affirmative action requires that companies hire a specific number of minority group members" (1 = not likely at all, 7 = extremely likely;  $r = .74$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These manipulation check items were administered after the third survey.

## Results

### Preliminary analyses

The manipulation check indicated that our feedback manipulation was interpreted as intended; participants in the positive feedback condition ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) rated their test performance significantly better than participants in the negative feedback condition ( $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = .92$ ),  $t(82) = 14.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .72$ .

Participants in the quota description condition ( $M = 5.59$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) expressed a significantly higher belief in affirmative action quotas than participants in the non-quota description condition ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ),  $t(82) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .27$ . In addition, support for affirmative action was significantly lower in the quota condition ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) than in the non-quota condition ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ),  $t(82) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . And, as expected, the quota belief manipulation check measure and the support variable were negatively correlated,  $r = -.50$ ,  $p < .01$ . Thus, it appears that the quota belief manipulation worked as intended.

Before testing our main hypotheses we examined the correlation between the main dependent variables. Replicating Studies 1 and 2, self-esteem ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) and self-perceived competence ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) were positively correlated,  $r = .64$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### Main analyses

We expected to find the lowest levels of self-esteem and self-perceived competence among participants assigned to the non-quota and negative feedback conditions. According to our reasoning, informing White men that affirmative action is not a quota policy is equivalent to taking away a self-esteem protective belief. Thus, when individuals in the non-quota condition are presented with negative intelligence feedback, they should be vulnerable to this threat and consequently report lower self-esteem. In contrast, White men who are assigned to read that affirmative action is a quota are, in a sense, handed a self-esteem protecting belief, and thus they should be less sensitive to a self-image threat. Finally, individuals who receive positive feedback should accept this information as evidence of their self-competence and should report high levels of self-esteem regardless of their beliefs about affirmative action. To test for this specific pattern in the data, we



constructed a planned contrast in which the *negative feedback–non-quota description* condition was coded as  $-3$  and the remaining conditions were coded as  $1$ .<sup>3</sup>

**Self-esteem.** As shown in Fig. 3, the planned contrast revealed that participants in the *negative feedback–non-quota description* condition ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) reported marginally lower self-esteem than their counterparts in the *negative feedback–quota description* condition ( $M = 5.74$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), the *positive feedback–non-quota description* condition ( $M = 5.47$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) and the *positive feedback–quota description* condition ( $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ),  $t(83) = 1.86$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ .

**Perceptions of competence.** A similar pattern emerged for perceptions of competence (see Fig. 4). Participants in the *negative feedback–non-quota description* condition ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = .85$ ) reported lower perceptions of competence than participants in the *negative feedback–quota description* condition ( $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = .73$ ), the *positive feedback–non-quota description* condition ( $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) and the *positive feedback–quota description* condition ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = .66$ ),  $t(83) = 2.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .09$ .

**Mediation analyses.** To directly test the hypothesis that quota beliefs boost non-beneficiaries' sense of personal competence, we conducted an analysis to test if perceptions of self-competence mediated the effect of the planned contrast on self-esteem. To this end, we used the planned contrast term as the predictor variable and assessed whether its effect on self-esteem was mediated by self-perceived competence. As depicted in Fig. 5, the planned contrast variable was marginally related to self-esteem. Second, the predicted effect of the contrast variable was positively related to self-competence, the pro-

<sup>3</sup> Given the specificity of our predictions, omnibus analyses of variance (ANOVAs) do not provide an appropriate test of our hypotheses; for this reason, contrast analyses were conducted to test our main hypotheses (Judd, McClelland, & Culhane, 1995; Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 1999). However, for the sake of completeness, we also conducted a pair of omnibus ANOVAs. Although the pattern of means reported above supports our prediction and conceptually replicates the results of Studies 1 and 2, the effects in the omnibus ANOVAs did not achieve significance. On self-esteem, the main effect of quota beliefs was not conventionally significant,  $F(1, 80) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .13$ , nor was the main effect of test feedback,  $F(80) = .15$ ,  $p = .70$ . In addition, the interactive effect of quota beliefs and test feedback on self-esteem also failed to reach a conventional level of significance,  $F(1, 80) = 1.00$ ,  $p = .32$ . On self-perceived competence, the ANOVA found a main effect of test feedback,  $F(1, 80) = 5.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ , such that participants in the negative feedback condition ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) reported lower self-perceived competence relative to participants in the positive feedback condition ( $M = 5.87$ ,  $SD = .73$ ). No main effect of quota belief was found,  $F(1, 80) = 1.35$ ,  $p = .25$ . In addition, the interactive effect of quota beliefs and test feedback on self-perceived competence also failed to reach a conventional level of significance,  $F(1, 80) = 1.11$ ,  $p = .30$ .

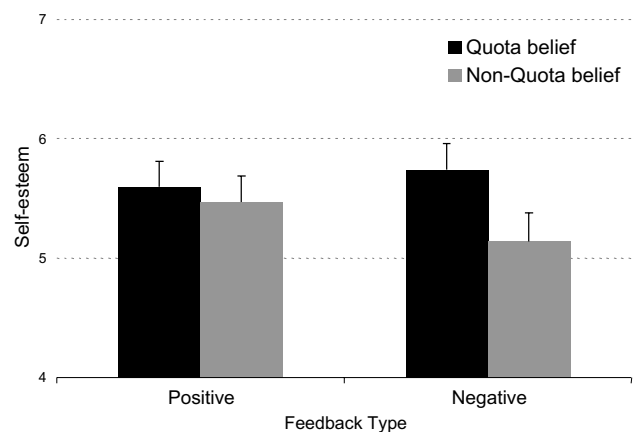


Fig. 3. Self-esteem as a function of feedback and affirmative action quota belief (Study 3).

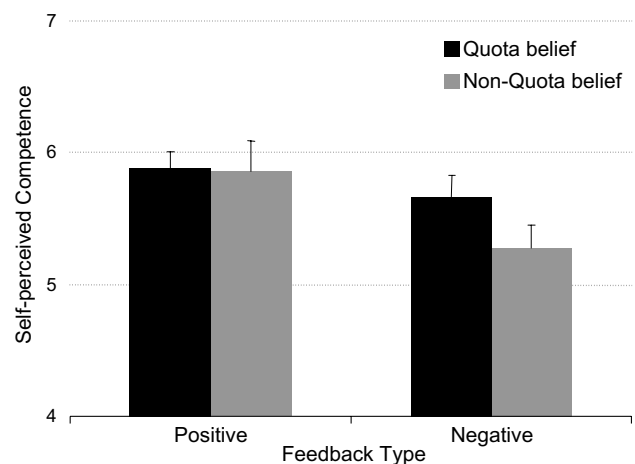


Fig. 4. Self-perceived competence as a function of feedback and affirmative action quota belief (Study 3).

posed mediator. To determine if the mediator accounted for the direct relationship between the planned contrast and self-esteem, we ran a regression analysis with both these terms as predictors. This attenuated the direct relationship between the contrast variable and self-esteem. A Sobel test confirmed that the attenuation of this relationship was significant ( $z = 2.64$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

The results from Study 3 conceptually replicate the results from Study 2. When faced with a self-esteem threat, White men who were led to believe that affirmative action entails quotas were protected from such a threat. Conversely, White men who were informed that affirmative action does not entail quotas were adversely affected by negative feedback. As such, Study 3 provides experimental evidence for the hypothesis that perceived discrimination vis-à-vis a belief in quotas can boost White men's self-perceived competence and consequently protect their self-esteem from threats that can-

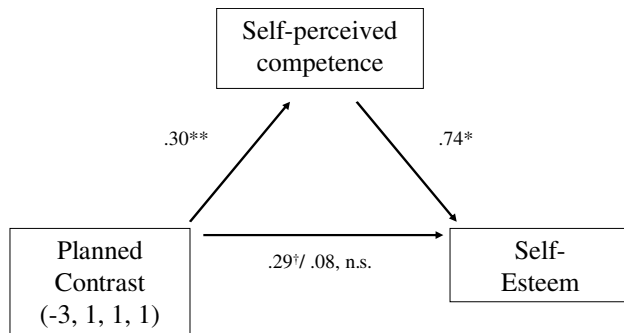


Fig. 5. Mediation analysis for Study 3.  $\dagger p < .10$ .

not be directly attributed to the supposed effects of affirmative action quota procedures.

### General discussion

The present studies suggest that White men (individuals who do not directly benefit from affirmative action) can use the belief that affirmative action is a quota (a form of the policy thought to discriminate against White men) to protect their self-esteem. Specifically, quota beliefs were shown to boost White men's estimates of their own competence, which in turn allowed these individuals to shield their self-esteem from negative feedback on a bogus intelligence test.

Moreover, the present studies demonstrate that the power of quota beliefs to protect the self extends beyond situations in which threats to self-esteem can be directly attributed to discrimination. Extant research on the self-protective properties of perceived discrimination cannot account for such findings, as this research limits the self-protective properties of perceived discrimination to threats that can be directly blamed on discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1991; Major et al., 1994). In the present studies, there is no link between the potential influence of a quota-based affirmative action policy and negative test feedback; therefore, participants cannot blame affirmative action for their poor test performance. Yet bringing to mind the belief that affirmative action is a quota boosted White men's self-perceived competence and consequently protected their self-esteem from negative feedback. Thus, the reported studies suggest that perceptions of discrimination may function as an even more versatile means of self-esteem protection than previous research suggests (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker et al., 1991; Major et al., 1994).

Replicating past research, Study 2 found that racial minorities and women were derogated by White men as a function of their belief that affirmative action is a quota (Evans, 2003; Heilman et al., 1992; Heilman et al., 1997; Resendez, 2002). However, this derogation does not account for the protective effect of quota beliefs

on White men's self-esteem. This implies that White men derive self-esteem benefits from quota beliefs through a self-focused, rather than other-focused process. This finding coheres with recent research suggesting that White Americans' views on race related matters are influenced more by a concern for the self and the in-group than by concern for members of racial out-groups (Lowery et al., 2006; see also Lowery et al., in press). Additionally, this finding is in line with past research suggesting that intergroup bias results more from a tendency to favor the in-group than a tendency to derogate out-groups (Brewer, 1979, 1999). Regardless of the specific process through which White men derive self-esteem benefits from quota beliefs, the fact remains that quota beliefs contribute negatively to the perceived competence of racial minorities and women. As such, the eradication of erroneous quota beliefs should remain a top priority for organizations wishing to create and maintain diversity through the use of race- and gender-based policies.

#### *What links quota beliefs to self-perceived competence?*

Questions remain regarding the specific mechanism linking quota beliefs to self-perceived competence. To this end, future research should be conducted to uncover the mediators of the quota belief to self-perceived competence link.

#### *Augmenting past successes*

It may be that individuals who believe affirmative action is a quota see themselves as having had to "overcome" quota policies in order to have attained their past successes. In the parlance of attribution theory (Kelley, 1973), White men may augment their past successes by retrospectively perceiving these successes as having been achieved in the face of quota-created adversity. Such augmentation may allow those who believe in affirmative action quotas to perceive themselves as being highly competent—presumably because the only way they avoided falling victim to quota policies was to be so competent that not even a discriminatory quota policy could deny them access to a coveted admission slot or job. This route to self-esteem maintenance may be especially popular in an individualistic culture like that of the United States (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Given this country's affinity for self-made individuals who overcome long odds en route to realizing the "American Dream" (Hochschild, 1995), claiming that one had to overcome discrimination en route to success may be an effective and common strategy for staving off the negative consequences of self-esteem threats.

#### *Discounting past failures*

Those who believe in affirmative action quotas may retrospectively discount past failures (e.g., not getting

a job or not getting accepted to a selective university) by attributing these failures externally (i.e., to the influence of affirmative action quotas) as opposed to attributing them internally (i.e., to some personal deficiency). This process may allow White men to minimize the negative consequences of past failures while simultaneously reassuring them that they are, in a more general sense, competent individuals. This retrospective boosting of competence, in turn, may allow individuals to protect their self-esteem from threats in the present-day.

The processes described above need not be mutually exclusive. Perceived discrimination may allow individuals to revise their personal history by reinterpreting past successes as more impressive testaments of their self-competence while simultaneously discounting their past failures as non-diagnostic of their true competency. Whether perceived discrimination allows an individual to create a revised personal history is topic worthy of future research.

#### *Self-affirmation via affirmative action quota beliefs*

The findings presented in this paper are readily interpretable through the lens of self-affirmation theory. Self-affirmation theory suggests that individuals can protect themselves from a variety of self-esteem threats by affirming important and central self-perceptions (Steele, 1988; see also Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Affirming such general self-perceptions allows individuals to maintain global conceptions of self-adequacy, which in turn lessen the negative effect of particular threats to self-esteem. Self-affirmation theory suggests that people strive to maintain a globally positive self-image rather than to resolve each and every threat to self-esteem that they encounter.

Past research on self-affirmation theory has shown that validating a central and desired self-perception reduces individuals' sensitivity to a variety of self-esteem threats. For example, self-affirmed individuals are less likely to shift their attitudes in order to reduce cognitive dissonance (a source of self-esteem threat) than are their non-affirmed counterparts (Steele & Liu, 1981). Self-affirmation has also been shown to reduce the likelihood that individuals will attempt to bolster their self-esteem by negatively evaluating a stereotyped target after experiencing a threat to the self (Fein & Spencer, 1997). In all, research on self-affirmation suggests that when an important perception of the self is affirmed—and thus the overarching goal of maintaining positive self-esteem is satisfied—individuals are protected from a wide variety of self-image threats (even those completely unrelated to the affirmation).

Past work on self-affirmation has tended to affirm individuals by having them reflect on values of high personal importance (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995). These tasks have the psychological effect of affirming participants' global self-adequacy and this, in turn, pro-

protects them from specific threats to their self-image. To our knowledge, researchers have yet to explore if individuals can affirm the self by appealing to resources external to the self. The studies presented here suggest that White men may be able to use the belief that affirmative action is a discriminatory quota policy to affirm their self-perceived personal competence and consequently protect their self-esteem from threats that cannot be directly linked to quotas. Future research using a methodology more in line with extant work on self-affirmation should be conducted to determine if the belief in affirmative action quotas is a viable source of self-affirmation.

#### *Implications for the affirmative action debate*

Some scholars have attributed the persistence of the belief that affirmative action is a quota to misinformation about the policy (Kravitz & Platania, 1993; Pincus, 2003). One source of this misinformation might be the portrayal of the policy in mass media (Fish, 2001). Frequently, the policy is depicted as entailing strict quotas and for this reason it is not surprising that many individuals (especially those who are not direct beneficiaries of such policies) believe that affirmative action is a quota-based policy (Haley & Sidanius, 2006; Kravitz & Platania, 1993). A suggested strategy to curtail the belief in quotas has been to increase educational efforts about affirmative action (Collison, 1992). The present research, however, suggests that educational efforts may not be entirely effective in mitigating the belief in quotas. If believing that affirmative action is a quota provides White men with a way to protect their self-esteem, then this belief may persist precisely because it has a positive effect on White men's self-esteem. Thus, educational efforts may be ineffective in reducing the belief in quotas because such efforts require non-beneficiaries to give up a belief that benefits their self-esteem.

If, as the present research suggests, beliefs about affirmative action are ego-relevant for White men, then the misinformation present in the media might be especially attractive to White men who are low in self-esteem. If this is true, then appeasing White men's self-esteem maintenance motivation prior to exposing them to education about affirmative action might make these individuals less resistant to the idea that affirmative action is not a quota policy. In support of this idea, work by Sherman and his colleagues (2000, 2002) has shown that individuals become more accepting of threatening information after their self-esteem maintenance motivation has been appeased.

#### *Future directions*

If quota beliefs have a generally positive impact on the self-perceived competence of White men, then it is

conceivable that quota beliefs may also protect White men from other types of self-esteem threats (e.g., negative personality feedback). To test this possibility, future research on the self-protective properties of quota beliefs should use operationalizations of threat different from the one used in the present studies.

Study 2 found that quota beliefs stigmatize affirmative action beneficiaries as incompetent in the eyes of White men. However, this stigmatization does not account for the positive effects of quota beliefs on White men's self-esteem; rather, quota beliefs benefit White men's self-esteem by boosting their self-competence. However, it remains possible that quota beliefs stigmatize racial minorities more so than White women and that the stigma associated with particular groups may be better able to account for the positive relationship between quota beliefs and self-esteem. The present studies do not allow us to test this possibility given that perceptions of beneficiaries' competence were assessed conjointly—that is, racial minorities and women were all rated on a single scale. Future research should explore if quota beliefs differentially affect the perceptions of competence of *particular* beneficiary groups.

The present research examines the effects of quota beliefs on White men's self-esteem. Future research should examine if other non-beneficiary groups, such as Asian Americans, experience similar self-esteem benefits as a function of quota beliefs. In addition, exploring the effects of quota beliefs on White women's self-esteem may also be of interest. Do White women consider themselves to be affirmative action beneficiaries or do they assume that affirmative action only benefits racial minorities? Moreover, does self-perceived beneficiary status moderate the effect of quota beliefs on White women's self-esteem? It may be that White women who do not consider themselves beneficiaries of affirmative action derive self-esteem benefits from quota beliefs whereas White women who do consider themselves beneficiaries of affirmative action feel stigmatized as a function of quota beliefs. Future work on White women's beliefs about affirmative action may prove to be an interesting area of research.

Despite widespread interest in social group identity, little research has focused on White's self-perceptions with regard to their social group membership (for an exception see Knowles & Peng, 2005). A number of theories suggest that members of dominant or majority groups may not experience themselves in terms of their group (Flagg, 1993; Perry, 2001). However, in the reported studies, White men benefited from a common belief about affirmative action, and by doing so tacitly accept that their destiny is tied to the destiny of their group. The acknowledgement of this common fate raises interesting questions about the way members of dominant groups manage the less-desirable aspects of dominant-group membership (e.g., unearned racial or

gender privilege). The nature of the challenges created by dominant-group membership and dominant-group members' responses to these challenges may prove to be a fruitful area for future inquiry.

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